

Bought: When Editorial Advertises
Why promotional stories on the news pages are bad for journalism

by

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Abstract

Preventing the spread of promotional journalism into the main news sections of newspapers necessarily means creating an awareness among journalists about what factors allow the promotional story format to proliferate and what the ensuing consequences are for the industry. The production of promotional journalism hinges on three points: 1) the increased savvy of public relations practitioners and the press releases they issue; 2) the increased acceptance of the advertorial-style news story; and, 3) dwindling newsroom resources. These factors work in concert, with each playing an essential role in how promotional journalism occurs.

The publishing of promotional articles erodes credibility and informative value.

While instituting a law to keep journalism free of commercial influences, as in some European countries, is unlikely in Canada, the onus is on journalists to be more aware of promotional journalism and its consequences. This will stimulate their ethical and moral obligations to the public and the industry.

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Introduction

In the last decade, the Tim Hortons coffee chain has evolved into a Canadian institution. Named after its founder, legendary Toronto Maple Leaf Tim Horton, the coffee shop has been around for more than 40 years, but its brand popularity has only truly sky-rocketed in recent years as a result of ingenious marketing and advertising strategies (Alexander 2005). The Tim Hortons' campaign has a certain *je ne sais quoi* that Canadians have chosen to link to their identity. They affectionately call the coffee-and-donut chain "Timmys" and the ubiquitous coffee order of "double double" (meaning two creams and two sugars) has become a mainstay of the Canadian lexicon, earning itself a place in the Canadian Oxford English Dictionary in 2005.

Despite this level of attachment, on March 8, 2007, the *Ottawa Citizen* raised some eyebrows when it ran a half-page story on its front page rhapsodizing over a local man's invention to help Tim Hortons' patrons "roll up the rim to win" (a Tim Hortons' contest that has prizes embedded on the rim of medium and large-size coffees that are revealed when unrolled). Headlined "Ottawa invention makes it easy to play again . . . and again . . . and . . ." (Lackner 2007, A1), the story outlines how an Ottawa inventor developed the "rimroller," a device to ease the burden of unrolling the rims of disposable coffee cups. Within the first five paragraphs of the story, it is reported when and where the product can be purchased: "The Rimroller, which fits on a keychain, will go on sale at Lee Valley Tools in Ottawa in the next few days and will soon be available at the company's 12 stores across Canada . . ." (Lackner 2007). By the end of the story readers are told the rimroller will initially sell for \$2 a piece. The story was indeed a "talker," but some journalism experts stopped to consider if the story was a case of the news media taking their affection for the coffee chain a step too far.

While some called the story "news you can use," others called it free advertising and said it had no business being on the front page or even presented as news. This story and others, along with its presentation on the front page, a space

traditionally reserved for timely, event-driven news stories or features about such topics as politics, the economy and public affairs, raise questions about what qualifies as journalism today and about the future of the industry in general. While the story features a local inventor and has a popular culture angle, it also blatantly promotes the Tim Hortons brand and the inventor's new gizmo. The addition of product prices and store locations indicating where to buy the product elevates the story into the realm of promotional news. Journalism expert Don Wycliff, associate vice-president of news and information at the University of Notre Dame and a member of the Florida-based Poynter Institute, felt there was "no journalistic point whatsoever to this piece being written as a full-blown news story and presented on the front page" (Wycliff 2007). This raises the question: If the journalism industry considers itself to be a pillar of democratic society, where does the "rimroller" story fit in?

The act of a newspaper giving a business a free mention by way of gratuitously including product and pricing information, a company name or its web address into a news story falls into the category of promotional news — the blurring of the line between news, or editorial content, and advertising copy. This story format is akin service journalism. A two-part definition of service journalism is as follows: 1) "service journalism represents the development of a hybrid social identity — part citizen, part consumer, part client — that is oriented to resolving the problems of everyday life in ways that can combine individualistic and collective political forms of response" (Eide and Knight 1999, 527); and 2) service journalism seems to "conform primarily to the logic of consumerism, positioning its audiences not as citizens with rights and responsibilities to participate actively in public debate about the common good, but as privatized, passive individuals who relate to the public life of society according to the exchange logic of the market" (Eide and Knight 534). That is to say, such news provides newspaper readers with advice, explanations and possible "market-driven" solutions to everyday problems and, in a sense, it is "news you can use."

For a comparable definition of promotional news, Graham Knight, chair of

communication studies and multimedia at McMaster University in Hamilton, advises that it “links advice giving to corporate interests” (Knight 2007). This could take a direct form such as “product placement” or a more indirect form in the sense that corporate practices receive affirmation or legitimization as a kind of side-effect of advice giving (Knight 2007).

If rolling up the rims on Tim Hortons’ coffee cups leaves a person with the unpleasant problems of “broken fingernails or wax in the teeth” (Lackner A1), then the Citizen’s front page story is simply offering its audience a solution to an everyday problem via a news story framed within the definition of promotional news. The newspaper is merely “looking after” its readers (Foucault 1988), advising them on how to resolve or prevent an irritating, albeit minor, problem. Everyday life is complex, difficult and fast-paced and corporate marketing machines know it. They offer countless, consumer-driven options for solving any problem. This menagerie of choices can simplify life for some — you have a problem, solutions are available — but for others the volume of options can be overwhelming. Enter the newspaper and its ever-increasing role of “responding to and offering commentary and advice on the everyday concerns of [its] audiences” (Eide and Knight 526), often through the presentation of promotional news stories.

Had the “rimroller” story appeared in the Lifestyle section or on the Food pages, it likely would not have caught the attention of so many readers — and perhaps that was the point. What was likely not expected is that it would also raise the hackles of some newspaper critics, bringing forth questions about the use of promotional news and the integrity of the newspaper and the news business itself. But its appearance on the front page, packaged together with three illustrative photographs, caught the eye of many and led to several important questions and points for discussion. The example highlights the increase in promotional news stories and the propensity of newspapers to run them on traditional news pages, thus adding to a multitude of issues challenging journalism and newspapers today.

Newspaper executives are already grappling with what to do about the alienation of readers and the growing distrust of traditional media; the disengagement

from traditional and public journalism; low reporter and editor morale and a lack of commitment and adherence to the standards and ethics of basic journalism; a drop in real and perceived moral power; and a decline in readership (Kuttner 2007). Add to that list the increased use of promotional news stories and suddenly promotional journalism is another factor at play in the changing face of the industry.

That said, some say the appearance of promotional news on the traditional news pages is merely a reflection of “the changing function of the media as they move away from providing information, toward actively constructing social identities” (Edmonds 2004, 2). The result is the ushering in of “a ‘postmodern public sphere’ which challenges traditional definitions of what constitutes useful or appropriate knowledge about public affairs” (Hartley 1996, 155). By that rationale, promotional news is merely a reflection of a changing society, and perhaps the appearance of it should not be so ardently questioned. However, does the “rimroller” story, for example, with all of its how-to-purchase details, warrant front-page coverage simply because it touches a cord with some Canadians? It can be argued that Bob Franklin’s (1997) lament in *Newszak and News Media* about the trivial taking precedence over issues of importance, and that the media are failing to maintain their social responsibility (Edmonds 2004) is certainly at play here.

Where once the media represented the public sphere, providing rational-critical debate while upholding the separation between the public (information belonging to people as a whole) and the private (information belonging to an individual) (Calhoun 1992), the media have become further commercialized and are now used, in part, to promote consumption by acting as a “forum for publicizing ‘personal needs and difficulties’ and acting as ‘authorities for advice on the problems of life’ ” (Eide and Knight 1999, 534 and 172). With that in mind, this thesis argues that now is the time to examine promotional news, in the face of rapid societal and industry responses to a changing culture. In this age of widespread and largely blind acceptance of embedded marketing, experts are predicting no journalistic ground is sacred.

This thesis is a critical analysis of the spread of the promotional news format

into traditional news sections which will, in turn, show such coverage erodes the quality of journalism and compromises the very journalistic standards on which newspapers and reader confidence were built. The research shows the steady production of promotional news stories and the continuous push into traditional news sections threatens the integrity of editorial content while depriving readers of critically informative, unbiased, issue-based journalism.

With promotional news seeping into news stories and onto pages that have traditionally been devoid of free advertising, and with reporters now either unwittingly, surreptitiously or subconsciously writing what basically amounts to free product mentions into news stories, are they not failing to meet the basic standards of what constitutes journalism? These standards have been defined as: “To provide something unique to a culture — independent, reliable, accurate and comprehensive information that citizens require to be free” (Kovach and Rosentiel 2001, 11), and “to help [readers] to define [their] communities, and help [them] create a common language and common knowledge rooted in reality” (Kovach and Rosentiel, 17). Promotional news at once distinguishes and disguises itself both in form and content, making it difficult for readers to immediately identify it. The form is bigger, brighter, punchier, more colourful and contains more graphics. The “rimroller” story, for example, was splashed across almost half of the front page and contained three illustrative, full-colour photographs. The copy is peppered with website addresses, prices and product names. The content — both the subject matter and writing style — is light, airy, almost flippant and filled with colloquialisms to make the stories personal. And finally, its placement in a traditional news section is deceptive.

The forward momentum of promotional news from speciality sections such as Driving and Weddings, to soft news sections such as Fashion, Food and Lifestyle, into the more traditional news sections, such as City News and the A-section — those pages containing the stories that build reader confidence and are wholly interpreted as being contextual, credible, unbiased and free of advertising pressures — is reason enough to examine the story format now. The flow of promotional news through newspaper sections can be linked to a time period starting mainly with the

post war 1950s when the growth of mass consumption began in earnest. At that time, this format “was first evident in sections of the newspapers devoted to women’s issues and concerns, in articles on cars and driving . . . and in articles on new consumer goods, . . . and in discussions on how to cope with everyday life in the modern world” (Eide and Knight 1999, 528).

Today, that concept has shifted into the news sections, which are undergoing a type of “redefinition of what counts as interesting to media consumers, which reclaims the importance of the domestic, the feminine, the private and the personal” (Lumby 1999, 15). Suddenly, rolling up a disposable coffee cup rim is supposed to be of great interest to newspaper readers; the story is about a new consumer good designed to help coffee drinkers cope with the sometimes difficult-to-roll-up rims on cardboard coffee cups.

From the 1950s onward, promotional news stories began to appear more frequently for several reasons. People had more access than ever before to disposable income and were more exposed to advertising, products and affluent lifestyles, thanks to cable television and, much later, the Internet (Wehner 2000). With this came the idea that a particular type of “lifestyle” could be accessible to everyone, or at least that is the way the middle class saw it.

This eventually led to newspaper editors asking not only if a news story had solid content and facts, but to consider if it connected with the reader’s “lifestyles” (Wehner 2000). Ultimately, this led to a “dismantling of the ‘firewall’ between the editorial and business sides of news organizations” and in the process has “blurred the traditional lines, re-envisioning their media firms not as newspapers . . . but as ‘content providers’ or ‘information providers’ ” (Wehner 205).

To be sure, journalism is now the combination of the public and private spheres in that it covers both daily political and event-driven news, as well as timeless, human interest stories (Hartley 1996). What this thesis sets out to establish, however, is that journalism was not meant to evolve passively into market-driven or promotional news, the production of stories based on, for example, specific products or stores or companies. Instead, it will examine the changing face of

journalism with respect to the number of promotional news stories appearing in newspapers and what it means for journalism, as well as provide solutions on how newspapers can preserve their reputations as serious and legitimate news providers.

While some experts believe it is a “naive indulgence” to think that the public stewardship of traditional journalism can be maintained amid a “new economy” of information flows, unfettered capital and global consumerism (Wehner 227), this thesis argues that newspapers must adhere to their core principles and standards or they will cease to exist as anything more than consumer tout sheets, drifting into irrelevance (Greenspon 2007). If journalists continue to “weaken their commitment to journalistic principles and public service in exchange for financial gains, credibility erodes and the audience will eventually turn away” (Poynter Online 2002). As well, this thesis examines the other influences that are eliciting the changes to content beyond product and business exposure: it looks at advertising, advertorials, the role of the public relations practitioner and the press releases they issue, and the affect of dwindling newsroom resources, both financial and personnel, on reporters and editors. It is only after all of these factors are taken into account that a clear picture of the how and why of promotional news begins to appear.

In order to do this, several aspects need to be rigorously examined. A historical look at newspapers and advertising is necessary to set the stage. This will begin in Chapter 1, where a detailed history of newspaper journalism will be presented, including the evolution of news and advertising and, ultimately, the overlapping nature of those two independent spheres that is today rampant and increasingly accepted in news sections. “While routines of news production are analogous to the ad creative craft . . . news production begins with events in the real world” (Soar 2000 and Hall 1972, 61); an idea worth exploring. A notable difference between this early time period and today is that then editors were more eager to accommodate advertisers demands by wilfully allowing advertisements to be written up as news. Now, the evidence indicates that the production of promotional journalism isn’t necessarily due to advertising pressures, but rather other factors that

will be explored in subsequent chapters. Chapter 1 examines convergence or companies' propensity to integrate all types of media — print, broadcast and the Internet — under one umbrella, thus threatening “what have normally been regarded as the newspapers' unique strengths — its traditional, distinctively separate, and specialized presentation of news and views to readers” (Hildebrandt, Soderlund and Romanow 2005, 106). The rise of the public relations practitioner will also be examined as it relates to not only putting forward story ideas and information for journalists, but how they help to create solutions for “everyday life problems” by promoting products with sufficient financial backing to make consumers think they want them and need them. Lastly, this chapter concludes with several examples of promotional news stories from sections such as Fashion, Food and Lifestyle.

Chapter 2 is a compilation of original data collected from traditional news sections, in this case the A-section and the City section, from daily, metropolitan Canadian newspapers over a consecutive three-year period. Each story from the sample set contains promotional elements of varying degrees. What the data proves conclusively is that promotional news has indeed slipped onto what are considered to be the traditional news pages and is appearing with some regularity. As well, this chapter provides a section of terms that are frequently used throughout this thesis and details on the data collection and testing methods. It puts each story through a series of test questions and ranks and classifies each piece according to the amount of promotional material featured. For example, where does a story fit that mentions a product by name — “Soaps with such bacterial-killing agents, such as Proctor & Gamble Co.'s Safeguard and Henkel's Dial” (Heavey 2005, A9) — when just writing “common hand soaps” would have conveyed the same message? The same is asked of stories that list prices for products and the stores where they can be purchased. Several stories are presented and critiqued by journalism and communication experts and working reporters to allow for a range of opinions on each piece and to determine at what point the promotional content outweighs the journalistic purpose of the stories. As well, business operators who received gratuitous mentions discuss how, if at all, they benefited from being highlighted in a

news story. This chapter provides the venue for individual stories to be dissected and closely examined by all of the players involved: the reporter, the business operator and an independent expert from the field of journalism.

Chapter 3 adds depth and context to the data by uncovering the factors that tend to result in promotional journalism news stories. Through a review of the existing literature and a series of interviews, this chapter examines three key points as they relate to the production of promotional stories. It argues that each factor flows into the other, resulting in a story that is then compromised by the inclusion of too many sales features. The three factors are: 1) the increased savvy of public relations practitioners and the press releases they issue (Wycliff 2007 and Steele 2008); 2) the increased power and acceptance of the advertorial-style news story (Ellerbach 2004 and Welch 2008); and, 3) dwindling newsroom resources, on both a financial and personnel level (Greenwald and Bernt 2000, Downie and Kaiser 2002, Dornan 2003, DeLorme and Fedler 2004, Welch 2008). Several examples are then utilized for analysis to show how the stories are a result of the above three factors.

With the previous chapters allowing for data collection and story critiques, as well as consideration and examination of the factors that result in promotional stories, Chapter 4 addresses the idea of promotional material as a “reader service,” as well as what influence those who advertise in newspapers hold and if their power is real or perceived. By allowing for this examination, the results shows that, in Canada, promotional journalism generally occurs unintentionally or with “good” intentions, and not as a result of clandestine agreements between advertisers and reporters and editors. The chapter offers interviews with Lifestyle reporters who explain how they decide what to include and why they include product information in their stories. It also looks at examples from the United States, where advertising pressures are a far greater issue, to demonstrate that this phenomena is not something that is unique to Canada.

After showing that promotional journalism does occur in news sections in Canadian metropolitan, daily newspapers, Chapter 5 turns to the value of a well-done news story. Research for this chapter shows the importance of imparting

knowledge to readers via news stories, and how that allows for the creation of a public dialogue and for the community to become engaged in what is happening in the world around them.

Chapter 5 also uses an example to examine the reasons behind the decision to re-design the *Globe and Mail* in 2007. The national newspaper re-configured itself to address the speed in which readers access the news via the Internet, and the importance of having people read today's news tomorrow in the print version of the newspaper (Greenspon 2007). In order to do this, the editors made a commitment to, in a sense, returning to the roots of journalism by providing more investigative, interpretative and insightful coverage than in recent years (Greenspon 2007). This thesis looks at the one-year time period following the relaunch of the newspaper to determine if investing in newsroom resources results in fewer promotional stories. The current economic climate also plays a part in this analysis as the *Globe and Mail* this year shed 10 per cent of its workforce, presenting an opportunity for future research with regards to an increase or decrease of promotional stories based on economic circumstances.

Lastly, the conclusion of this thesis will tie together all of the elements brought forward for examination and show how they relate to promotional journalism and today's newspaper. It will also touch on the idea of a "post-journalism era" (Altheide and Snow 1991) and a "post-newspaper society" (Engel 2003) and why some experts feel the public is moving beyond traditional, print journalism. Within that frame, the "separation principle" will be considered. The "separation principle" is a piece of European legislation that prohibits, by law, the inclusion of promotional elements in news stories in an effort to keep journalism free of commercial influences. Specifically, in Germany, one particular law reads: "The mention of products, services, names, brand names or activities of a manufacturer service-provider which are unnecessary from a journalistic or artistic point of view ('product placement') are to be regarded as surreptitious advertising. And surreptitious advertising is prohibited."

It is important to note that parts of this thesis were somewhat limited by the fact that many of the reporters who wrote the stories collected for this project, as well

as the editors at the five papers in which the stories ran, refused to comment when they were contacted and asked about how and why the stories evolved the way they did. Beyond that, with the exception of a few, most of them did not even return phone calls or reply to e-mails. If contact was made, they generally outright refused to comment, often taking offence to the overall concept that their stories could be considered promotional. When individual reporters at the *Globe and Mail* were contacted, for example, they directed the query to their editors, who in turn directed it to Edward Greenspon, the newspaper's editor-in-chief. When his office was contacted, his assistant insisted Greenspon does not do interviews with students for any reason whatsoever, because he receives too many requests to even consider obliging them. She suggested e-mailing him directly, but that it was unlikely he would respond. An e-mail was sent to Greenspon, but he did not reply. As well, contact was attempted with him when he hosted the newspaper's "Live Online" forum in April 2008 that allows readers to ask questions of journalists and executives at the *Globe and Mail*. Several questions were posted to the site, but all went unanswered.

Similarly, attempts were made to contact individuals at many of the companies and businesses mentioned in the stories collected for this thesis. Generally, the queries were better received, with several managers and owners agreeing to speak about the stories that appeared in print pertaining to them. These comments have largely been included in this thesis.

The thesis was also somewhat limited by the fact that the topic was at first too broad and later too narrow. While initially the plan was to investigate promotional journalism as it appeared in the newspaper, regardless of section, it quickly became evident that the original scope of the project was too wide. Hence, it was narrowed to examine promotional news as it appeared in the A-section and the City section, under the supposition that it was almost as prevalent in those two parts of the newspaper as in the lifestyle sections. However, after collecting data for a three-year period it became apparent that it was not as prolific as originally thought.

The decision was made to forge ahead with the project because it was felt

the topic remained valid and the research would be worthwhile, but it must be conceded that at times it felt as though the thesis statement was simply too narrow.

A further and major limitation of this thesis is that not much research on this topic specifically is in existence. Much of the research was primary, from the collection and testing of data, to the interviews. Secondary research was necessary to vet out errors in the primary work and lend support, but the fact remained that there simply was very little information already out there on the topic. Due to this factor, it was difficult to conduct interviews with experts on this topic because there are few. Almost all of the interview requests of experts were met with, "This is an interesting topic . . ." or "Tough questions . . ." or "I have never considered this . . ." These responses, naturally, were quite disconcerting. Eventually, experts were secured for interviews and they were able to shed some light on promotional journalism and their thoughts on why it occurs.

The combination of there being little available information and research on promotional journalism as it appears in traditional news sections — or any section of the newspaper — and the reluctance of reporters and experts to give interviews led to some difficulties. However, by conducting and analyzing primary research and through the use of materials available, studying the topic still proved to be worthwhile.

Chapter 1

The progression of promotional news through the sections

Commercialism . . . has a legitimate place in a newspaper, namely, in the business office . . . But commercialism, which is proper in the business office, becomes a degradation and a danger when it invades the editorial rooms. Once let the publisher come to regard the press as exclusively a commercial business and there is an end of its moral power (Peterson 1969, 42).

Advertising as we know it today was virtually non-existent when Canada's first newspaper, the *Halifax Gazette*, published its premier issue on March 23, 1752 (Kesterton 1984). But that is not to say early news sheets were not reliant on money-making announcements for at least a fraction of their survival. Right from the start, "revenue-producing government announcements, proclamations, orders and enactments made up a large part of the newspapers' content" (Kesterton 1984, 6). This content was a direct reflection of the audience at the time and of the original purpose of the paper. The initial newspaper audience was largely a group of educated, politically motivated readers who wanted a paper that was essentially a political tout sheet. As well, these same patrons were often responsible for subsidizing the paper by placing government advertisements, and therefore carried considerable influence. As newspapers grew into more populist organs, however, and began catering to a wider audience with broader tastes, other advertisements began to appear as business owners realized newspaper advertising would allow them to single-handedly reach vast numbers of people who would likely be interested in purchasing their goods and services. These ads largely took the form of unpolished classifieds often highlighted by a rough-and-ready woodcut depicting the item for sale. While small in size and brief in description, these advertisements were grouped with similar items for sale, for example, farm implements, and presented as a package of ads on one or two pages of the paper.

Once newspaper advertising proved to be profitable for merchants, they began to demand more space to place even more ads. The subsequent increase in

revenues meant newspapers began to grow in size and were gradually transformed into bona fide commercial enterprises that contributed to the economy of the day. Suddenly engaged in a co-dependent relationship, newspapers found that to satisfy a mass audience, more advertising was needed to create more space, but in order to convince advertisers to place more ads, newspapers needed to show they were reaching a wider readership. To accomplish this, newspapers needed to hire more staff to increase and expand news coverage, but this was expensive and to pay for it newspapers sought to secure more advertising. Despite this growth, the style and format of advertising was still relatively simple into the mid-to-late 1800s with wholesale merchants and retail shopkeepers advertising the “arrival of new goods in some detail, but in straightforward language, permitting variation in the type styles and sizes to add emphasis where necessary” (Fetherling 1990, 32 and 33). Competition for advertisements was — and remains — strong and parties on both sides of the business equation were quick to realize this.

At this early stage in the Canadian newspaper game, however, advertising was still only one of three main ingredients needed to keep newspapers in business — government contracts and subscription sales were the other two. That said, by the mid 1800s the importance of government advertising was already starting to slowly give way to the publishing of more elaborate and more pervasive and consumer-driven ads. “Advertisers began to get away from the mere listing of what they had to offer, and began to make extravagant claims and to fill their ‘copy’ with exhortatory and imperative phrases” (Kesterton 1984, 17). As merchants came to recognize that advertising boosted sales, they became more motivated to place advertisements in newspapers. Thus, advertisements became an integral part of the newspaper, so much so that they were necessary for its survival.

Newspaper proprietors and advertisers operated within the parameters of this model until about the time of Confederation. As the population grew, business people were eager to reach an ever-growing audience. For them, this meant an increase in newspaper advertising. For newspapers, it meant a need for more space and more readers to accommodate the growing demands and convince

advertisers it was worth their while and their money. As the two entities established a solid working relationship, this happened: “Vastly increased advertising revenues financed the industrial revolution in the press — faster and bigger presses, linotypes that speeded up typesetting, and photoengraving plants that made the newspapers more attractive — all of which allowed newspaper publishers to reach a mass audience to sell the goods of their advertisers” (Sotiron 1997, 6). Suddenly, advertisers were driving the growth of Canadian newspapers with their demands. They wanted larger, attention-grabbing advertisements that would run more frequently. Newspaper editors did their best to accommodate the demands; the need for the revenue and profits could not be denied. During this time, “some advertisements were deceptively disguised as news stories” (Kesterton 1984, 48), a sign that both advertisers and newspapers were willing to experiment with new ideas and formats. However, “such offerings misled the reader in a way probably not so serious as did advertisements which made fraudulent claims of providing universal cures, but they were irritating for the way in which they duped the reader into reading what he might not have otherwise read” (Kesterton 1984, 149).

This ill-advised editorial/advertising style was deceptive at best and shortly thereafter gave way to the advertorial (Kesterton 1984). An advertorial, generally, is an advertisement presented in the style of a news story, but with a label identifying it as an advertisement (Ellerbach 2004). With the arrival of department stores and brand-name advertising in the late 1800s, the pressures faced by newspapers to manage the flow of advertisements while keeping up with their own editorial agenda only increased. Many newspaper owners realized that they would again have to appeal to yet a wider audience and set out to do this by redesigning their publication to make it more attractive. As a result, “advertising and the related drive towards circulation growth and self-promotion became the chief engine of newspaper development” (Sotiron 1997, 7).

Not surprisingly, this heavy reliance on advertisements to help keep newspapers in the black and to help them grow into big businesses led some newspaper editors and publishers to further blur the line between news content and

business promotion. This desire led to the birth of “speciality sections” in the early 1900s, thus keeping the blended copy out of the proper news sections (Sotiron 1997). These sections had a specific focus, such as women’s fashion or business anniversaries, and were a combination of editorial content on the given topic and complementary advertisements also pertinent to the subject. Speciality sections gave newspapers “an excuse to solicit ads not only from regular advertisers but also from concerns that did not normally advertise and also led to an increase in circulation” (Sotiron 1997, 67).

Critics of this practice, however, were quick to point out that “what passed for news in these specials amounted to little more than advertisements or promotion of special interests presented in a news format” (Sotiron 1997, 67).

Nevertheless, newspaper editors continued to face pressure from advertisers exercising, or attempting to exercise, control over editorial content. Real or perceived threats from business people to withdraw advertisements because of unfavourable news coverage — usually political news with which they disagreed — was viewed by some as an attack on freedom of the press. Regardless, many newspaper publishers at that time caved to the pressure and “reduced the role of the editorial page and decreased the amount of political coverage and social commentary in their newspapers. More space was devoted to news and entertainment. The amount of sensational and trivial material, such as ‘human interest’ stories, increased” (Sotiron 1997, 14 and 15). News coverage shifted from federal and provincial politics to more sensational local stories of lurid crimes, scandals and disasters.

As an example of how important advertisement sales were — and continue to be — to newspapers, it should be noted that advertising consistently made up 70 per cent or more of a newspaper’s total revenues in the first years of the 20th century. By the First World War that had increased to more than 80 per cent (Sotiron 1997, 62). Today, that figure remains largely the same. While financial figures are similar between then and now, the reasons behind the production of promotional stories is not. Then, it was largely due to editors succumbing to pressure from

advertisers. Now, there are several other factors that are linked to the story format and evidence shows that in Canada, advertising pressure is largely kept in check by editors and reporters.

The early years, however, brought with them a struggle for power and control, and a line was eventually drawn between the newsroom and the advertising department and, once again, the speciality section was deemed to be the middle ground (Sotiron 1997). The speciality section, it can be argued, provided the format that later became the framework for the promotional news story that is the topic of this thesis. The speciality section is one of the first formats which introduced newspaper readers to the comprehensive packaging of promotional news. Not only do these sections still exist, but they are growing in size and variety while using the same recipe to get the point across to readers. Speciality sections are a regular feature of mainstream Canadian newspapers on everything from the latest in new technology to new homes and even wedding planning. Today's speciality sections, however, are most often produced in an office separate from the main newsroom, by staff other than the core news reporters, a practice that is supposed to allow newspapers to keep a safe distance between unbiased news reporting and copy influenced by advertisers.

The typical style of speciality section copy is one that is laden with references to products, prices, brand names and companies. The editorial content is then surrounded by complementary advertisements. This brand of news found its place in speciality sections, but in time, it began to work its way into what has long been considered unbiased news coverage. It started first with softer news sections such as Fashion, Food and Lifestyles. Now, giving some cause for concern, it has seeped onto the pages that have traditionally been considered to be the news pages of the newspaper. More alarmingly perhaps, the story format has even penetrated the front pages of newspapers, as was shown with the earlier example of the Tim Hortons rimroller invention. The stories are seemingly running uncontested as newspaper publishers and editors across the country continue to allow the line between editorial content and advertising copy to be blurred, an act that is capable

of eroding the quality of journalism and risking editorial credibility with readers.

If the idea of journalism is to “provide something unique to a culture — independent, reliable, accurate and comprehensive information that citizens require to be free” (Kovach and Rosentiel 2001, 11); and if “the news media help us define our communities, and help us create a common language and common knowledge rooted in reality” (Kovach and Rosentiel 2001, 17) then it would appear that promotional news fails to meet the criteria as set out in this definition. Rather, it is often nothing more than a thinly veiled attempt to make news out of information that would be better served in a paid advertisement. Yet, the story format has seemingly been given carte blanche, creeping from advertorials to speciality sections to lifestyle sections to the A-section and City section with little standing in the way of it becoming an acceptable news story structure.

In order to illustrate this point and gain a greater understanding of how promotional journalism began to invade the realm of standard journalism practices, it is necessary to first look at how it evolved from the speciality section into the lifestyle-focused sections, where it is now commonplace. Following that, it is necessary to look at how it has moved onto the news pages. This promotional story format is frequently used in lifestyle sections of daily, metropolitan newspapers in Canada. It is common for several stories in one section to announce store openings or new products, and to include all of the details needed to attend an event or make a purchase. As Andrew Wernick writes in his book *Promotional Culture* (1991): “The space between the ads must provide a good selling medium, which entails the same general sheen of consumerism, the same positive/upbeat tone, and the same touting of conventional values which characterize the ads. The need to address and attract the audiences which advertisers seek leads, as well, to similar psycho-ideological approaches ...” (Wernick 99). In his argument, Wernick portrays newspapers as existing solely to play host to advertisements; moreover, he goes on to conclude that “the whole media product is an ad. For besides the paid ads, the “real” (or non-advertising) content of a newspaper . . . serves as a magnet to draw audiences to the ads in its midst” (Wernick 99).

Wernick's is an accurate description of what is occurring within the genre of promotional journalism. The stories, whether intentional or not (a concept which will be discussed in detail in later chapters) are the equivalent of free advertisements and it is felt that lifestyle sections generally "cover a sector with primarily monetary objectives . . . that may affect a journalist's autonomy in relation to the medium, the source and colleagues" (Charron 1989, 41).

A prime example of promotional journalism from a lifestyle section is that of Ron Eade's "Supermarket Sampler" from the *Ottawa Citizen* Food section on Nov. 24, 2004. In the story's introduction, Eade writes: "We were somewhat overwhelmed the other day to receive a crate of new President's Choice items from Loblaws to sample, including hors d'oeuvres for Christmas parties and some no-brainer entrees to reheat when you're too busy to fix supper from scratch" (Eade 2004, E3). The story is half a page in size and highlights 11 different President's Choice food products. Each product mentioned is accompanied by a photograph, a brief description and a price. It should be noted the reader was already told the products are available at Loblaws, equipping them with all the information they need to go out and purchase the food. This information is normally provided in a paid supermarket insert tucked inside the newspaper. The example is a useful illustration of what many promotional news stories embody: a public relations practitioner sending a press package and an accompanying press release to a newsroom where a reporter turns it into a news story. Not only is the entire premise of the story essentially born from the press package, it would appear that Eade does not deviate from the information provided to him in that package. He does not add any context, depth or comparisons to other frozen foods. Further, the story highlights product names, prices and where it is available. This story, and others like it, falls woefully short of meeting the criteria as per the definition of journalism as defined by Kovach and Rosentiel (2001) earlier in this chapter.

When contacted about the articles he writes for the Food section, Eade (2007) said he does not consider the pages of the section to be "regular news pages" and consequently, the stories that appear are not held to the same standard

as those appearing in the City and A-sections of the *Ottawa Citizen* (Eade 2007). While Eade may feel he is not only safe, but justified, in presenting promotional news within the confines of his section, the fact remains that the promotional format he is so fond of is now seeping onto the “regular news pages” he claims are free of it.

In Canada, many metropolitan dailies publish news stories that are little more than thinly veiled advertisements for a wide range of retailers. The *Globe and Mail's* Style section routinely runs promotional stories for Toronto businesses or national companies that are either launching new products or simply highlighting old ones. For example, on page L7 of the Sept. 25, 2004, *Globe and Mail*, a news story featuring the “Tide Buzz” is displayed with three columns of text and a photograph of the product. The story amounts to little more than an infomercial using sentences such as “The marriage of Tide cleaning power and Black & Decker technology, this iron-sized appliance eliminates tough, nasty stains using, you guessed it, ultrasonic waves” (Clark 2004, L7). The article concludes with a paragraph in italics, but does not offer an explanation as to why it is offset from the other copy. Both the reporter and editor were contacted, but neither would agree to an interview regarding the piece and others like it. However, the set-up of it suggests it was likely taken directly from a press release, as the final paragraph reads:

The Tide Buzz system is available at major retailers across the country. The starter kit, which includes one appliance, 10 ounces of cleaning fluid and five stain catcher pads, retails for \$69.99 (Clark L7).

Other stories in the *Globe and Mail's* Style section often provide store locations, telephone numbers and hours of operation. In the Oct. 16, 2004, edition, an article headlined “Hot Shop Umbra” is about a new Umbra furniture and housewares store opening in Toronto. Writer Tralee Pearce details a variety of products available at the new outlet and the corresponding prices and a five-column photograph has a cutline that reads, “A shopper peruses Umbra's new store, located in the Design Exchange at 234 Bay Street in Toronto (416-216-2160)”

(Pearce 2004, L4). The article concludes by listing the store's hours of operation and a notice that tickets for a shopping gala can be purchased by calling a phone number contained in the copy. Nowhere in the newspaper is there a paid advertisement by Umbra announcing its new store opening. Again, using the framework laid out to establish the parameters of promotional news, it is not difficult to see that Umbra did not need to shell out big bucks to take out an advertisement when the article did the work for them. By presenting the information in the form of a news article, the Umbra store also attains a certain level of credibility that it would not have received had the store taken out an advertisement, as it has been proven time and again that readers trust the truth and validity of news stories more than that of the paid advertisement (Haley and Cunningham 2003). That view was further validated by a court in Berlin, Germany, considering a case of "surreptitious advertising." The court ruled that the news story before it had crossed the line between advertising and news, basing part of its decision on the fact that "consumers regularly attached greater importance to editorial content than to advertising that was clearly identifiable as such" (Kammergericht 2007).

These three pieces are not only strong, but, in fact, common examples of how promotional journalism has made the leap from paid advertorials and the speciality section to everyday sections of the newspaper. The content of these stories, "Supermarket Sampler," "Tide Buzz" and "Hot shop Umbra," amounts to little more than free advertising. They offer readers product descriptions, store locations, product prices, store telephone numbers and website addresses to contact the store. They are, in effect, advertorials, yet they are purportedly done freely by the reporter, without any influence beyond the press release and/or the promotional press package. The newspaper reporters and editors have carefully framed the pieces with headlines, bylines and artwork, packaging them to appear as though they are traditional news stories. However, proponents of promotional news, such as Eade, argue that these types of stories are simply offering a service to readers, rather than transforming newspapers into consumer tout sheets (Eade 2007, Haley and Cunningham 2003).

There is the danger that “independent journalism may be dissolved in the solvent of commercial communication and synergistic self-promotion” (Kovach and Rosentiel 2001, 18). And it is just this warning that is being directed at newspapers as “market-based journalism [becomes] increasingly divorced from the idea of civic responsibility” (Kovach and Rosentiel 2001, 30). Its regular appearance has only dulled readers to its style and format, making its move into the more traditional news sections such as the A-section and City section perhaps less offensive and therefore somewhat seamless.

The following are three examples of single-sourced, promotional stories that appeared on the front pages of Canadian newspapers. The first appeared in the *Ottawa Citizen* as a single-source story detailing the merits of a new cellphone for tweens and young teens. It amounted to nothing more than an informative advertisement for the phone company. The lead and second paragraph are as follows:

Rogers Wireless hopes its new cellular offering will soon light up the pockets of thousands of preteens across Canada.

Called the Firefly, the new phone is smaller than a regular cellphone, has only six buttons, plays fun ring tones and, true to its name, will perform a light show for its owner by flashing many different coloured lights (Piliéci 2005, A1).

The reporter goes on to highlight the “big selling points” (Piliéci A1) of the phone, lists a website address where more information about the phone can be found, and provides extensive pricing and purchase information. For example:

Rogers is offering the Firefly phone to its customers free when it is added to a Rogers Wireless Family Plan.

Alternatively the phone can be purchased for \$149.99 on a pay-as-you-go-basis, or for \$49.99 when combined with the two-or-three-year contract (Piliéci A2).

In an attempt at balance, the reporter then lists some details of a new Barbie cellphone for children being released by Mattel and Nokia, again providing details about colours, ring tones and wallpaper. There is no context to the story, no comment from marketing experts, parents, tweens, health officials and no statistical data on phone use. These points would have fleshed out the story, making it more of a legitimate news piece rather than simply a mouthpiece for Rogers Wireless. As well, a search of the web-based, newspaper database Infomart shows the story was picked up by the Canwest News Service and made available to the more than 40 newspapers in its chain. It also ran on the front page of the *Vancouver Sun* during the same time period.

A month earlier, the *Globe and Mail* ran a similar front page story on the same product, advancing its arrival in Canada. While it did not go as far as the *Ottawa Citizen* story in that it did not offer prices, it did provide readers with this:

The Firefly — a phone designed for smaller hands, with features that allow parents to control all incoming and outgoing calls — has been doing brisk business in the United States. Rogers Communications Inc. will release the Firefly in Canada early next month
(El Akkad and Lai 2005, A1).

Another example is a front page story in the *Globe and Mail* about contact lenses, providing readers with all of the information needed to purchase the eyewear while omitting any context. In the story “Athletes report eye-popping results” (Christie 2005, A1), the top two paragraphs are as follows:

A new generation of contact lenses that filter light promise to enhance performance for elite athletes and regular folks alike.

The MaxSight soft lenses, to be launched this summer by Nike and Bausch & Lomb, improve the wearer’s ability to follow objects moving at high speed and have been tried by a handful of top athletes. Some but not all, have experienced eye-popping results (Christie 2005, A1).

The article goes on to detail how the “buzz is building” and under what circumstances the lenses are most effective, for example, bright sunlight; but what the story fails to do is provide context. There is no comment from marketing experts, health officials, doctors, contact lens wearers, or athletes who wear glasses.

While these articles have the potential to be engaging news stories about evolving technology and the changing face of society, they fall considerably short, in some instances only providing comment from a single source. In fact, the information provided in the cellphone and contact lens stories is not that different from the information provided in the stories mentioned earlier in the Style and Food sections of newspapers. The difference, however, is that the first set of examples were placed in sections known to contain lighter news, while the latter examples appear on the front page and other leading news pages.

In today’s climate of media concentration and control, the problem is exacerbated when numerous news outlets are drawing from the same pool of completed news stories. A promotional story that is allowed by the editors at the *Vancouver Sun*, for example, a paper owned by the Canwest Global Communications Corp. chain, can then be picked up by any one of the other newspapers in the chain and run again and again. For example, the story about the Tim Hortons rimroller invention that originally ran in the *Ottawa Citizen* on March 8, 2007, was also in the national edition of the *National Post* on page A8 on the same day, reaching an audience from coast to coast. Similarly, the stories can also appear on the corresponding websites as today editors rush to post stories online even before they appear in print.

More than 100 examples of promotional news stories that appeared in the A-section and City section were collected for this thesis as a means of providing concrete evidence to complement the theoretical material that outlines how promotional news stories are capable of eroding the quality of journalism and compromising the standards on which reader confidence was built. Those stories will be examined in more detail in the following chapters, and the larger question of why well-established newspapers of record are submitting to this form of journalism will

be investigated.

While advertising had modest beginnings in the newspaper industry, it was only a matter of time before merchants' demands began to financially dominate newspapers' bottom lines. Once business people worked out a newspaper advertising formula that resulted in increased sales and revenues, they never stopped using newspapers as their leading medium to get their message out.

Similarly, once newspaper publishers discovered advertising sales would keep newspapers in business, they devised a plan to increase readership by providing more sensational news coverage, thereby creating more space in which to sell more advertisements. Using these two historical facts, both merchants and newspaper publishers could work together to ensure the survival of their respective businesses.

The maturation of newspapers throughout the 19th and 20th centuries brought larger papers, more sophisticated advertisements and a growing audience. At some point along that timeline, promotional news emerged as a tolerable and practicable form of journalism. This allowed public relations practitioners to use their press releases to obtain varying degrees of free advertising as reporters and editors were often quick to write up the information in the press releases as bona fide news stories, while failing to provide an opposing view point or any form of analysis.

Arguably, food and fashion stories can be stories of substance, but by morphing into advertisements they are defying the basic rules of journalism and failing to provide well-balanced, thought-provoking, issue-based stories that inform, educate and enlighten the public. Promotional news may inform readers of upcoming sales and educate them as to where new products can be purchased, but it does not meet any of the other criteria of journalism.

These questions and issues will be addressed in subsequent chapters, with particular emphasizes on uncovering what changed, allowing for the rise of promotional news.

Chapter 2

Data Collection and Testing

Today, journalism is undoubtedly the combination of the public (information concerning people as a whole) and private (information belonging to an individual), whereas it once represented only the public sphere, providing rational-critical debate while upholding the separation between the two entities (Calhoun 1992). Nevertheless, the combination of the two means newspapers are wholly capable of adhering to journalistic standards when covering news that is public, such as political and event-driven news, as well as when printing stories from the private realm such as timeless, human interest stories (Hartley 1996). The premise of this thesis, however, is that journalism should not be allowed to morph into promotional news, that which is service-based, market-driven, commercial or consumer in nature. In order to prove that journalism was not intended to combine news with the elements of advertising, several areas must be explored.

The thrust of this chapter will be to present a set of original data collected specifically for this thesis. More than 100 articles were analyzed from a variety of daily, metropolitan newspapers from across Canada during a consecutive, three-year period. All of the articles collected were viewed as having a promotional “feel” and were found in what are commonly called the news sections — that is to say, for example, the A-section or the City section and not the Style or Food sections. Each article was then tested against the basic principles of journalism in order to determine if the tone and proportion of the promotional elements outweighed the journalistic purpose of the story. The intent of this examination, which is supported by the data, is to determine if promotional journalism is indeed seeping into journalistic news pieces seemingly unchecked. While this chapter will present the data and the testing methods, subsequent chapters will provide context for the data by way of a theoretical examination.

Before presenting the findings, however, definitions of the terms most frequently used in this thesis will be set out using conventional interpretations, so as

to prevent confusion about, for example, the differences between hard and soft news, or journalism, news and information.

Terms

Today, both **hard and soft news** provide readers with important, useful and unbiased stories about the government, society and the individual (Gripsrud 2000). Both news formats include some or all of the standard news story criteria including: immediacy, proximity, prominence, oddity, conflict, suspense, emotions and consequence (Mencher 2003). The difference between hard and soft news is not found in the content, but rather the presentation. Historically, however, news was divided up between categories and sections. There was hard news and soft news and the line between the two was based generally on stereotypical ideas of what men and women were interested in reading about in a newspaper. Hard news was considered to be the stuff of government, the economy, social issues, law and education, as well as conflict and violence and it appeared in the A-section or City section of the paper; soft news was the “stuff of fluff,” human interest stories about people, fashion, food and parenting that appeared in sections with similar names (Harp 2002). Today, these categories of hard and soft news have evolved beyond the gender specific niches they used to fill and are now defined more by content, rather than by the section of the newspaper in which they appear. As well, the soft news technique can be employed to cover far weightier issues than those of yesteryear.

Journalism is considered to be the “sense-making practice of modernity — it is the most important textual system in the world. Its importance lies not only in its giantism as a physical product, but also in its real and imagined power to affect other systems, actions or events . . . the most important textual feature of journalism is the fact that it counts as true” (Hartley 1996, 32 and 35). Journalism also has the ability to “provide something unique to a culture — independent, reliable, accurate and comprehensive information that citizens require to be free” (Kovach and Rosentiel 2000, 11); and, journalism helps people to “define [their] communities and creates a

common language and common knowledge rooted in reality” (Kovach and Rosentiel 2001, 17).

Promotional journalism goes a step further, linking advice giving to corporate interests (Knight 2007). It can take the form of “product placement” reporting, or it can be more indirect in the sense that corporate practices receive affirmation or legitimization as a type of side effect of the reporting (Knight 2007). Promotional journalism reflects the growing emphasis not only on consumer-oriented reporting, but also on news that is framed in individualized terms, on what an individual needs to have for personal use, rather than to know about current affairs (Knight 2007).

Commercial journalism “mixes seduction with reason, pop with politics and commerce with communication (Hartley 1996, 201). That is to say, in society’s quest for comfort through commercial acquisitions, parts of journalism [have been] almost completely colonized by commerce (Hartley 1996, 200).

Service journalism is advice-giving journalism or “news you can use” (Knight 2007). It is geared toward communicating information that people can apply in their own everyday lives and addresses a “hybrid social subject — part citizen, part consumer, part client” (Eide and Knight 1999, 525).

A dictionary definition of the verb “**to advertise**” is as follows: to promote goods or services publicly to increase sales (Oxford Dictionary of Current English 1993, 12). Advertising also has a “vested interest constructing and instructing a readership . . . by using very detailed and sophisticated techniques which are used not to make people buy but to make them read. Advertising, like journalism, is a textual system, and the influence it has over people is to train them in a certain kind of literacy” (Hartley 1996, 200).

An **advertorial** is an “advertisement often thinly disguised as legitimate news matter” and is considered “one of the fastest growing media trends in the advertising industry over the past decade” (Ellerbach 2004, 61 and 62). Advertorials are based on the principle that “the closer the (advertising) message gets to being construed as objective journalism, the more credibility the message will have” (Ellerbach 2004,

62). Advertorials often have the same look and feel as that of news copy, but are normally labelled with “Advertisement” (Cameron and Ju-Pak 2000), allowing readers to differentiate between the two disciplines.

Media are, therefore, the means in which journalism is disseminated to the public. If journalism produces the news, then the media distribute it (Hartley 1996, 40).

Methodology and Evidence

Ultimately, it can be argued that news ceases to be journalism when promotional news is allowed to invade its domain, transforming journalistic news stories into something akin to advertorials. Reporters incorporating features of the promotional story format, whether intentional or not, are in direct contravention with a golden rule of the Canadian Association of Journalists’ policy on editorial independence: “Journalists should avoid being spokespeople for products or companies” (CAJ 2007). Further, it can be argued that once promotional news penetrates journalistic news stories, newspapers are perhaps, unwittingly, redefining their core purpose, much like the Food and Fashion sections already have. Readers have now come to expect that product highlights and prices are de rigeur in stories such as the *Ottawa Citizen’s* “Supermarket Sampler” and the *Globe and Mail’s* “Hot Shop Umbra.” In time, it stands to reason that readers will come to expect the same from news stories, should the promotional journalism trend continue.

In *Journalism as Popular Culture*, Peter Dahlgren writes: “The growing gap between the realities of journalism and its official presentation of self means that the status of these multiple and larger ‘remainder’ categories is left somewhat indeterminate, while they in fact continue to grow and shape popular expectations of what the press and broadcast journalism are and should be” (Dahlgren 1992, 7). Dahlgren’s statement also extends to sections such as Style, Food, or Fashion, all of which eschew the rules of journalism to fulfil a perceived appetite for promotional content by writing in product names, prices and store locations. These sections are “little more than promotional sheets for the real estate, fashion, food, and travel

industries — who are among a newspaper’s major advertisers” (Parenti 1993, 71). Dahlgren’s point is this: there is a growing disconnect between what journalism is and what is being put forward in today’s newspapers via the promotional news format and it is the latter that is now shaping what readers have come to expect from journalism and newspapers.

It can be argued, however, that regardless of dwindling or changing expectations and new norms, this type of promotional reportage remains a detriment to the industry. It runs the risk of becoming another factor that “erode(s) public trust, weaken(s) societal influence, and eventually destabilize(s) circulation and advertising” (Meyer 2004, 42). “If readers and viewers lose faith in a news outlet’s autonomy, they will abandon it” (CAJ 2007).

This chapter provides a four-part analysis that includes, but is not limited to:

- 1) examining and testing the original data to determine and compare the proportion and tone of the promotional elements of each story to the journalistic purpose;
- 2) examining existing and relevant theories, with a main focus on mass communication theories;
- 3) conducting in-person, telephone and online interviews with both industry and academic experts, as well as working reporters and members of watchdog organizations about the collection of data, what it means and how it affects readers and the industry; and
- 4) producing a package of potential solutions and changes to slow or stop promotional news as suggested and analyzed by editors, journalists and academic experts.

Newspaper selection

The newspapers for this thesis — the *Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, *Toronto Star*, *Ottawa Citizen* and *Calgary Herald* — were selected based on readership size and the fact that they are generally considered to be influential, trustworthy and credible. These factors are measurable, albeit indirectly, as one tends to lead to the next (Meyer 2004). For example, a paper achieves societal influence when it obtains the public’s trust. In order to do this, the newspaper must be a reliable and dedicated news provider (Meyer 2004). The fact that these newspapers have large

circulations and are largely well-read means the public must consider them to be reliable and dedicated to reporting the news; otherwise, they would turn their attention elsewhere. The newspapers were also selected because they are metropolitan dailies which cover a wide variety of subject matters.

The *Globe and Mail*, for example, is Canada's dominant national newspaper with a cumulative six-day readership of 2.3 million, according to the 2007 Newspaper Audience Databank study, the most current data available. Not only does the *Globe and Mail* attract a large readership, its readers have an average annual income of more than \$75,000, thus they are "the most sought after demographic with money to spend plus . . . the most well educated, influential, and affluent Canadians" (*Globe and Mail* 2006). Likewise, the *National Post* was selected for similar reasons and because it too reaches a national audience with a cumulative six-day readership of 1.3 million, according to the same 2007 NAD bank study (Canadian Newspaper Association 2008). Articles from the *Toronto Star* were used because not only is it the largest paper in the Toronto market, which is the largest market in Canada, it is also the most read newspaper in the country with 2.7 million readers on a weekly cumulative basis, again according to the 2007 NAD bank study. The *Toronto Star* reaches 47 per cent of Toronto adults every week (Canadian Newspaper Association 2008). The NAD bank 2007 study provides readership data for 84 dailies in 54 markets and 57 community newspapers in 33 markets in Canada.

Two newspapers, the *Ottawa Citizen* and the *Calgary Herald*, were used to represent the metropolitan dailies owned by Canwest Global Communications. A study of communication theories allows for news articles taken from these two newspapers to represent the entire chain of 10 major-market dailies, which includes, among others, the *Montreal Gazette*, *Edmonton Journal*, *Vancouver Province* and *Victoria Times Colonist*. As well, the Canwest company also publishes 25 community newspapers across Canada reaching a total audience of 4.8 million readers weekly (Canadian Newspaper Association 2008). This is relevant because a popular school of thought surrounding media ownership states that the media

companies with the most status, resources and outreach set the news agendas, essentially establishing what direction and frame the news will have when smaller organizations cover the same issues (Herman and Chomsky 2002). Furthermore, studies show that “similar socialization” among journalists at different news outlets results in a type of “group think” or “pack journalism” mentality, a circumstance that limits journalists’ abilities to work outside of the dominant frame (Ericson, Baranek and Chan 1987). Because the editors and reporters at newspapers in the Canwest Global chain are working under similar editorial policies and guidelines established and set out by managers at the head office, they are therefore adhering to similar standards when it comes to determining what is newsworthy and how it is to be presented (Zurowski 2007). This is further demonstrated by the sharing of stories between the chain papers via an internal wire service, Canwest News Services, where stories are continuously selected and published in sister papers on a daily basis. Based on the “media ownership” and “similar socialization” theories, a hypothesis can be formed stating that stories which appear in the *Ottawa Citizen* and *Calgary Herald* are representative of stories that appear in all of the Canwest Global newspapers.

The two theories presented above also explain how examples of promotional news articles taken from the five dailies used in this thesis can be representative of articles that appear in other daily newspapers in Canada. If readership size, influence, trust and credibility are the benchmarks from which to measure a newspaper’s stature, and the five papers examined are owned by media companies with the most status, resources and outreach in Canada, they are then in a position to set the news agendas and establish what direction and frame the news will have when smaller organizations cover the same issues (Herman and Chomsky 2002). Similarly, if journalists working at newspapers of similar size tend to think as a “group” or “pack” (Ericson, Baranek and Chan 1987) and use a subconscious and automatic checklist to determine what is and is not news (Gans 1979), thus focusing news stories consistently without being bogged down by story selection (Gitlin 1980), then it can be inferred that these same journalists would be

inclined to think of similar ideas as either good or bad stories.

From this, it can be said that if the data collected for this thesis shows the most influential and trusted newspapers in the country allow promotional news to run on the pages of the A-section and City section, then, as the theories suggest, it is also happening at newspapers with smaller readerships, as well.

Data collection

Five major, daily Canadian metropolitan newspapers were put to the test to discover whether or not they were publishing stories of a promotional nature and, if they were, how many. The A-sections and City sections of the *Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, *Toronto Star*, *Ottawa Citizen* and *Calgary Herald* were examined from September 2004 to September 2007 inclusive. This database provided an opportunity to examine no less than 90,000 and possibly upwards of 200,000 news stories written in current journalistic style.

After broad examination of the database, articles were selected for further examination if they had a promotional “feel” and contained one or more of the following criteria: names of specific products, product prices, store locations, selling features of specific products or how-to purchase information. Each selected article was then tested using “the article test” (a detailed description of this test is available in the following section) to determine if the proportion and tone of the promotional content outweighed the journalistic purpose of each piece. During the three-year collection period, a total of 106 news articles passed the test and were determined in fact to be promotional in nature. Appendix A contains references to each of these 106 published promotional news articles.

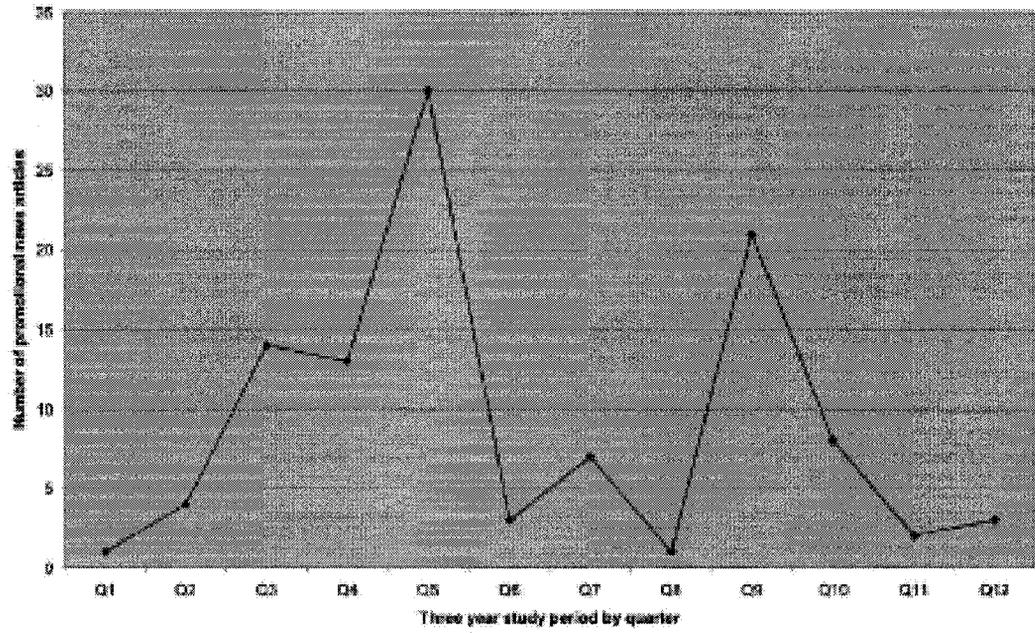
Having discovered 106 occurrences of promotional journalism over the three-year study period, the frequency of the occurrences over time was examined to determine if there was a developing trend or a change in trend, as suggested by Dr. David Foot, an economics professor at the University of Toronto who specializes in trend analysis. According to Foot, it typically takes three to five years for both short-term and long-term trends to develop to a point in which the data can withstand a

rigorous examination.

The number of occurrences were compiled into three-month periods beginning in September 2004 and thus provide a glimpse of the relative number of occurrences in 12 continuous quarterly periods for the three-year study period. Note that the study period quarters do not match traditional calendar-year quarters, but instead Q1 (quarter one) runs from September 2004 to November 2004 inclusive. Appendix A also shows the referenced promotional news articles by the study-period quarter in which they were published. It is acknowledged that the length of the data collection period for this thesis is at the low-end of the scale for trend analysis; however, by dividing it into quarters, each containing a consecutive, three-month time period, Foot felt it would still be possible to observe a statistical significance of differences within the data (Foot 2008). The breakdown over time would also allow for the observations of frequency, consistency and regularity. As well, it would allow for easy examination to compare if some quarters yielded a higher concentration of promotional news stories than others and if there was in fact any upward trend at work. A trend, generally, is “the relatively constant movement of a variable throughout a period of time. The period may be short-term or long-term, depending upon whether the trend itself is short-term or long-term” (Chicago Manual Style 2008).

Figure 1, below, shows a graph of the total number of occurrences of promotional journalism that occurred by quarter over the three-year study period (Q1 = September, October, November 2004). It is interesting to note that the two quarters with the most occurrences (Q5 and Q9) are for the months of September, October, November 2005 and 2006, respectively. These months represent the strongest period during the year for newspaper advertisement sales, combining both the back-to-school season and the start of the Christmas shopping season (Canadian Newspaper Association 2008). It would be of particular interest if this spike again repeated itself in what would be Q13 (September, October, November 2007). If it was to repeat itself, it would indicate the start of a trend (Foot 2008). Future research should then continue with this data collection period.

Figure 1 - Number of promotional articles by quarter over the study period



Once organized, the data was reviewed by Foot, who also determined there was not enough numerical evidence to establish, with any degree of accuracy, that an upward trend was at work. Nor was he able to determine any predictable appearance pattern based on the data, meaning he could not determine when the next promotional article would appear. He did, however, conclude that there was enough data to confirm that promotional journalism appears in news sections with an irregular frequency, meaning that while it is present, there is no discernible trend in how or when the stories appear (Foot 2008).

The data was then presented to University of Toronto professor Mike Evans, an expert in statistics. According to Evans, the data collected for this thesis showed frequency, as Foot concluded, but that no obvious upward trend could be plotted (Evans 2008). "You have some evidence to support your thesis, but a more sophisticated analysis wouldn't be much more convincing than what you already have. In other words, if the trend isn't really big enough to really hit you in the face, then a more sophisticated statistical analysis that teased out evidence of a trend wouldn't be that convincing anyway" (Evans 2008).

Despite there being no evidence of an increasing or decreasing trend, it is important to note that during the three-year study period, all quarters examined showed at least one occurrence of promotional journalism pointing to the conclusion that promotional news articles are appearing regularly.

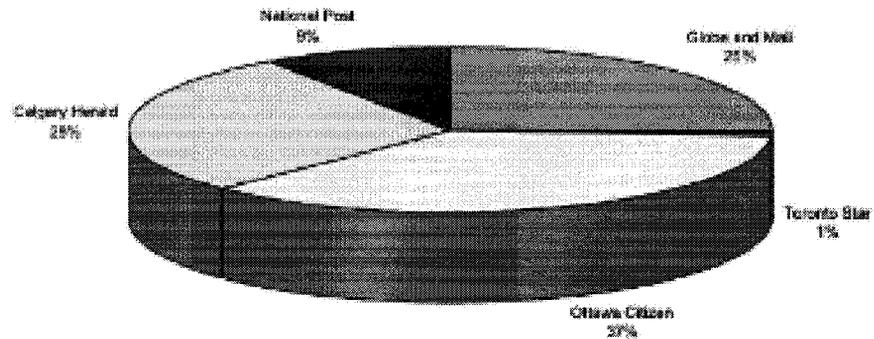
It is also interesting to examine the 106 articles deemed to be promotional in nature by originating newspaper and newspaper chain. Figure 2, on the following page, shows in a pie chart format a breakdown of the number of promotional news articles by publishing paper as a percentage of the total.

It can be observed that, as individual newspapers, the *Ottawa Citizen* and *Calgary Herald* (two of the largest metro dailies in the study) are the worst offenders, whereas the *Toronto Star* (the largest daily metro) published only one per cent of the promotional news articles discovered. One could hypothesize that these metro dailies, which serve a more concentrated community, could be more readily susceptible to publishing these types of articles, but the data is not large enough to

prove this categorically (Foot 2008).

By originating publisher, the three Canwest Global newspapers account for 70 per cent of the offending stories, but the fact they represent at least 60 per cent and possibly more of the total newspaper stories examined makes it difficult to make any definitive conclusions about that extrapolation at this time (Foot 2008).

Figure 2 - Breakdown of promotional news articles by publishing newspaper



In order to be thorough, the limitations of the method and analysis used for the data collection portion of this thesis must be acknowledged. First, it is likely that the number of promotional news stories published were greater than those collected and referenced here. Most of the research conducted was through the use of the electronic search engines Factiva and Lexus Nexus, and library microfiche, rather than by reading the newspaper in hardcopy. In the case of microfiche, there was more than one instance in which single pages, and in one case an entire day, were missing. It is also possible that promotional news articles could have been missed simply through human error. The article test itself was developed specifically for this thesis using accepted journalistic principles and mass communications theories. Given that there are few, if any, other similar studies, or, for that matter, accepted or proven scientific methods for measuring the occurrence rate for promotional news stories, the results of this thesis could neither be compared with any other studies, nor put to other, similar tests to extract results. It would be instructive to observe the results from a study of longer duration (for example five years or more) and to create an automated article test that could be applied to any electronic database of published news articles.

Initially this thesis set out to prove that promotional journalism was not only appearing on the news pages of daily newspapers, a fact in and of itself that is a detriment to the practice of journalism, but that it was also a growing trend. Analysis of the promotional news stories collected proved that it is in fact regularly occurring. The analysis could not prove, however — and concluded independently by Foot's and Evans' own examination of the numerical data — that there is a discernible upward trend present in the occurrence of promotional news stories. It is occurring regularly, but with neither a predictable frequency nor development of an increasing or decreasing trend over time.

This does not negate the validity of the research, a point confirmed by Foot, who says three years of data collection produces an abundance of information from which to work (Foot 2008). This thesis will continue to present the argument that the stories should not appear at all in traditional news sections as they lessen the

credibility and value of the other stories and of the newspaper establishment as a whole.

The article test

As mentioned in the previous subsection, Data Collection, each article was tested in order to establish the tone and proportion of the promotional elements and if they outweighed the journalistic purpose of each piece. This process began with each story first being scrutinized line-by-line. All overtly promotional passages were highlighted, this would include the mentioning of store names, specific products or prices.

For example, a May 1, 2005, *Ottawa Citizen* news story about a Sir John A. Macdonald action figurine has a subhead that reads: "Doll now carried by five Ottawa Wal-Mart stores" (Fitzpatrick 2005, A3). The lead paragraph is light, punchy and contains the information needed for readers to purchase the new doll.

A Montreal couple, so passionate about Canadian history that they created an action figure of Sir John A. Macdonald, are thrilled their product has finally made its way into Wal-Mart stores in Ottawa (Fitzpatrick 2005).

The story is interesting and newsworthy in that it is about Canada's first prime minister being fashioned into an action figure, but the addition of where it can be purchased, offered to readers in the lead paragraph, flags it for further investigation. It turns out that the store name, Wal-Mart, is mentioned five times in the 450-word piece, as well, the doll's price is included, \$14.97, and that "Wal-Mart will fully stock the dolls in time for Canada Day" (Fitzpatrick A3). Using this story as an example of one containing promotional passages that stand out, this process of highlighting promotional material was done for each story that was collected. Next, a series of test questions was developed. The questions were arrived at using both mass communication theories and principles that apply to the fundamentals of journalism, thus testing each article to determine if it could stand up to the basic requirements of

journalistic news writing. While this method is not scientific, the questions are relevant, straightforward and produce answers.

- 1) Does the story have news value?
- 2) Does the story serve a public benefit?
- 3) Does the story have a commercial aspect?
- 4) Is anything lost if that commercial aspect is left out?
- 5) What element receives the greatest weight: the news, the public interest or the commercial?
- 6) How many sources are used in the story? Is it single sourced? Is there comment from industry or academic experts?

In order to assume a degree of fairness and impartiality, all six questions were asked of every story. This gave each article room to defend itself, so to speak, and gave depth to the testing method. By asking the entire group of questions every time, a definitive answer could be drawn as to whether or not the articles' journalistic purpose was upheld. For example: Did the reporter explore multiple sides to the story? How much emphasis were the promotional elements given? How much promotional information was necessary in order to convey to the reader its importance to the overall piece?

Test results and Examples

In this section, several examples of promotional journalism will be presented, accompanied by academic and industry expert comment regarding the extent and necessity of the content and how it does or does not contribute to the overall journalistic purpose of the story. The first example put forward will serve as a control story, meaning it will be the standard that other articles will be compared and contrasted against. This will give readers an example of what is essentially a non-interfering level of promotionalism.

The story that will be used as the control is from the Oct. 21, 2005, *Globe and Mail*. Headlined "Accused Hutu appears in court," the story contains an

eight-word sentence that is promotional in nature in that it included the specific name of an online phone directory company, in this case, Canada411. The offending sentence is as follows, "Mr. Nyilinkwaya checked the Internet phone directory Canada411" (Curry and Thanh Ha 2005). While at first glance this mention may seem fairly innocuous, the reporter could have just as easily left out the company name and simply written, "Mr. Nyilinkwaya checked an Internet telephone directory." The name of the phone company is irrelevant to the telling of the story, but what is important is that the telephone number was found in an online telephone directory, thus demonstrating for readers the speed in which people can be accurately located by merely using the Internet to conduct a name search. Nothing would have been lost had the writer withheld the company name. That said, the one-time mention of the online phone company does not detract from the importance of the story or its journalistic purpose, nor does it diminish the quality of the journalism (Steele 2008). Therefore, this article will serve as a standard against which the others are measured.

While many experts interviewed for this thesis contend that promotional mentions in news stories are more oversight than intentional additions (Welch 2008 and Steele 2008), it does not negate the fact that reporters are giving considerable weight to product or business selling features. It only makes it more perplexing that they are ostensibly oblivious to this fact.

In a second example, the article selected for examination is chosen because it appears to be driven by news value or a public service commitment, yet contains a commercial thrust. In an Oct. 4, 2005, *Globe and Mail* story headlined "Ottawa plots making maps without paper" readers are told of a plan to produce government maps online, thus eliminating the need to produce paper maps. The reporter goes on to write that the proposal is worrying retailers and librarians about lost business and dwindling archives (Walton 2005). The reporter then interviews the owner of World of Maps and tells readers it is a store that sells government maps at the suggested retail price of \$11.45 each. A second store is also mentioned in a paragraph that reads, "Donna Nelson, co-owner of Gem Trek Publishing in Cochrane, Alta., just west of Calgary, understands the issues of cost. Her company

designs topographic maps of popular recreational areas in Alberta and British Columbia" (Walton 2005). Herein lies the necessity of testing each article with the six aforementioned questions. While it is possible to infer that this story indeed has promotional elements in it (it mentions two stores, the owners' names, store locations and the prices charged for maps), the news value and public service angle also have to be considered. The journalistic purpose of the story is to tell readers that something that has long been a government tradition is giving way to new technology; yet, a reader could easily use the promotional elements in the story to contact the stores and purchase maps. However, the telling of the story, in a sense, requires comment from someone who sells government maps and someone who is simply in the map business. While the use of multiple sources makes it less offensive, the reporter needed to include more details to flesh out the promotional elements that are included, for example: How much will online maps sell for? How much of the business at World of Maps comes from government map sales (Steele 2008)?

While this detailed critique by Bob Steele, a Nelson Poynter Scholar for journalism values and ethics and a senior faculty member at the U.S.-based Poynter Institute, may seem like splitting hairs, it is necessary to analyze news stories that appear to be marginally promotional, thus setting the stage for the articles containing a more blatant use of promotional elements. This leads to a third example, a quirky story taken from the front page of the March 11, 2005, *Ottawa Citizen* headlined, "Lack of passport photos puts Greenland off limits to Inuit." The reporter leads with a line that reads more like a job advertisement than a news story: "Officials in Nunavut are looking for an intrepid artist or sturdy entrepreneur to work as the northern territory's only passport photographer" (Eaves 2005). It is not beyond the realm of possibility to suggest that if this story was removed from its front page placement in the *Ottawa Citizen* and stripped of its newspaper treatments (headline, byline, subhead) and made to stand on its own, it would likely be mistaken for a job posting, rather than a news story. When contacted, reporter Sutton Eaves said he was merely having fun with the presentation of facts in an off-beat story. The story

serves to highlight the plight of Nunavumiut, who live in implausibly remote northern communities within Canada and are required to travel hundreds, sometimes thousands, of kilometres to the territorial capital of Iqaluit simply to have a passport photo taken. When contacted, Ed Picco, Nunavut's minister of immigration, said he was pleased with the coverage the story received, actually saying it was "better than taking out an ad" (Picco 2007). As a side note, the story did not attract an aspiring passport photographer to the territory.

These first three articles serve as examples of how the journalistic purpose of the stories ultimately outweighs the tone and proportion of the promotional elements. However, this thesis contends the reporters' writing was somewhat careless, and rendering these pieces wholly acceptable as news journalism would ultimately lower the standard against which other stories are measured. The next five examples are decidedly more overt in the use and display of promotional elements; in most cases, the articles contain the basic ingredients of a news story, but fall short on providing sufficient context to make the journalistic purpose of each story more relevant than the promotional tone.

A story that appeared on the front page of the Jan. 26, 2005, *Globe and Mail* perfectly illustrates this point. The story is about retired hockey great and Montreal Canadien Jean Beliveau auctioning off his hockey mementos in order to raise money for his two granddaughters. The reporter is quick to tell the reader about the items that will be auctioned off, when the auction will be held and how they can participate. The blatant inclusion of this information far overshadows the minimal context given to Beliveau as a player and his personal circumstances as a grandfather. For example, one paragraph, still on the front page, reads:

The man, who as one of the finest players in National Hockey League history helped define a franchise, is selling off 195 pieces of his legacy, from Stanley Cup rings to game used sticks to the Aces jersey that stayed in the closet longer than Mr. Beliveau played for the Habs. All the items are being auctioned on-line at www.classicauctions.net and could fetch \$300,000 to \$400,000 (U.S.) before the bidding ends on Feb. 22 (Maki 2005, A1).

This one paragraph gives readers all of the information they need to know about the auction, including what website to go to and when bidding closes, thus providing a healthy dose of free advertising for both Beliveau and ClassicAuctions.net. While the story does contain a public service element in that one of Canada's hockey greats is auctioning off his memorabilia, it fails to expand on why he is doing this. Other media outlets reported that the man who married Beliveau's only child, a daughter, was a police officer who died in the line of duty, leaving behind a young widow and two young daughters. Beliveau became a de facto father to his two granddaughters, who were 19 and 21 at the time of the story, and the decision to sell his hockey keepsakes was based on the desire to provide them with a secure financial future long after he is gone (CBC online 2005). This detailed information provides context to the story that engages readers on a deeper level, it appeals to readers emotionally. The *Globe and Mail* story did include some of those details, but it scaled them back to this one line: "He became a father figure to his two granddaughters when their father died several years back" (Maki A1). The story then quickly moves back into the selling features of the items, detracting from the news value of the story and giving it the feel of an advertisement. This observation was made by the experts who critiqued the story, and supported by the owners of ClassicAuctions.net who said the advertisement-quality of the story was reflected in sales.

"I can say that the story [in the *Globe and Mail*] easily increased our sales by more than 50 per cent. We made more than double than what we were expecting. The coverage definitely got a lot more people interested," said co-owner Marc Juteau (Juteau 2007). When Juteau and his other co-owners saw the front page story in the *Globe and Mail* — a direct result of their well-orchestrated press conference — they instantly knew they had a money-making event on their hands. Unlike many of the auctions held on the popular Quebec website that largely go unnoticed, Juteau began preparations to take the story to the press at once after Beliveau approached ClassicAuctions.net and expressed his desire to sell off his momentos. "We had a press conference right away and the story was covered

across the country — obviously we were extremely pleased with the coverage. Very, very happy,” he said (Juteau 2007). The front-page treatment the *Globe and Mail* gave the story, complete with a large photograph of Beliveau holding up his Canadiens captain’s jersey (Maki A1) was exactly what Juteau was striving to accomplish. To be fair, Beliveau was considered “one of the finest players in National Hockey League history” and one of hockey’s “true ambassadors” (Maki A1). ClassicAuctions.net expected his star power alone to generate between \$300,000 to \$400,000 in sales. It was the combination, however, of star power and press power that catapulted the Beliveau auction into the million-dollar domain.

This raises these questions: Did the newspaper go too far in providing readers with a web address, prices, a closing date and detailed descriptions of what was for sale? At what point did the news story become a promotional vehicle for the auction house?

The story almost certainly required descriptions of the items that were to be auctioned off. Those are details readers want to know, even those readers who had no interest in or intention of going to the online auction site before or after reading the story. Failing to report some of the items for sale and to provide a few short descriptions of those items would only leave readers wondering what was on the auction block. But when the reporter took it one step further by including the web address and closing date, contends one expert, the paper transformed the subject matter into a promotional story.

According to Don Wycliff, associate vice-president of news and information at the University of Notre Dame and an ethics adviser at the Poynter Institute, the Beliveau story is indeed justified in being on the front page, but the presentation and overwhelming inclusion of promotional information does a disservice to the paper. “I can’t justify what strikes me as shilling for the guy [Beliveau] and promoting his sale. This seems to me a clear case where the potential damage to the newspaper outweighs the service to the reader,” said Wycliff (2007). While the common purpose of the front page is to tell readers what the editors of a particular newspaper consider to be the most important news of the day (Wycliff 2007), it could be

argued the Beliveau story went one step too far. “The story itself is legitimate news, but the journalism was executed badly. Had the journalism been executed properly, there would have been no confusion about the nature of the story” (Wycliff 2007). As for the use of web addresses in news stories, few papers have hard-and-fast policies in place, but rather decide on a story-by-story basis when to use or withhold an organization’s electronic moniker (Steele 2008). Newspaper spokespersons and journalism experts interviewed for this thesis said they felt the decision to use a web address should be made based on both context and an assessment by the editors as to what best serves the reader without compromising the integrity of the story or the paper (Wycliff 2007 and Steele 2008).

Wycliff asserts that the line between what is journalism and what is simply promotional information is very easy to cross, intentionally or not, if reporters and editors are not extremely diligent in their work. The Beliveau story, while newsworthy, was presented in such a way that it amounted to little more than a free advertisement for ClassicAuctions.net, grossing both them and Beliveau close to an extra \$500,000 in sales in the process.

A further example of this type of blatant promotionalism — albeit with a different outcome — is from the Oct. 11, 2005, *Ottawa Citizen*. The story appears on page A9 and is headlined “Corporate gift giving goes extreme” (Harris 2005). About 50 per cent of the story is dedicated to highlighting a single business, Great Experiences, a type of adventure company that had launched a corporate gift-giving program. The story is awash in promotional content with paragraphs such as: “There are more than 100 hair-raising activities from which to choose, including dog sledding, learning a few tricks on a circus trapeze, race-car driving, hang gliding and even a ‘mile high club’ flight for two aboard a bed-equipped Cessna. Pole-dancing lessons will likely be added to the the rewards menu by the end of the month” (Harris A9); and, “For the less adventurous Great Experiences also offers a number of “soft options,” most of which are designed to accommodate couples and families. These include a sunset dinner aboard a train, a romantic spa weekend at Quebec’s Wakefield Inn, massage therapy, gondola rides, group cooking lessons, and a limousine

chauffeured night of professional hockey” (Harris A9). While the subject matter actually allows for context to be added to the story — for example, the reporter could have interviewed a pop culture expert, included evidence on how employees respond to reward programs, noted studies that show work performance and morale increase when employees are given incentives, or identified outrageous gifts as a workplace trend — the reporter instead fails to address anything other than the perks the company offers. With lines such as, “The kids are better left at home, however, when cashing in on the mile-high-club reward,” and “Nearly one in five of the executives had either gone skydiving or indicated they would like to try it in the future” (Harris A9), it is difficult to classify this story as anything other than a free advertisement.

The Ottawa-based Great Experiences business was launched by owner Sarah Bifield in 2005 with the intention of providing ready-made adventure holidays for corporations wanting to reward their employees in unusual ways. All an employer had to do was call Bifield, order a package holiday and she would make all of the necessary travel arrangements and bookings. The problem was getting the word out to businesses. Bifield tried cold-calling companies and sending out fliers, with little success. Knowing she should place advertisements in newspapers, but feeling it was too expensive, Bifield instead decided to call a newspaper reporter directly. “I just picked up the phone, called a reporter whose name I picked out of the paper and said to her, ‘You should do an article about me.’ And she did. I was very surprised at how easy it was to get a story in the newspaper. I just made one cold call and the story was done” (Bifield 2007).

Not only was her story written up, it was picked up by the *National Post* and read coast-to-coast. With an almost non-existent news hook, the reporter essentially wrote a positive, 550-word profile of Bifield’s business, complete with a large picture of a couple enjoying a glass of wine while relaxing in a jacuzzi (Harris A9). When Bifield read the article, she was over-joyed with the coverage she had received, “I was very happy with the way she portrayed my business, and the story meant I no longer had to think about taking out an ad” (Bifield 2007).

While the article was far larger and better placed than any advertisement she could have bought, Bifield admits it did not translate into instant sales for her. "I had a lot of inquiries from employers, but not a lot of sales. I also had a lot of calls from adventure tour operators wanting to jump on board with my business. I think maybe the idea is too 'out-there' for some people," she said (Bifield 2007). Since her promotional story was published, the entrepreneurial Bifield has banked on the tactic of cold-calling reporters to elicit news stories about her other business ventures. "That is definitely the strategy I use now because it is so easy and so effective. Even though a lot of people didn't buy a [holiday] package, I heard from a lot of people that they read the article in the paper" (Bifield 2007).

This technique, according to Wycliff (2007), is popular with small-business owners or event organizers because it usually results in a positive story at no cost at all. As well, as it was stated earlier, readers tend to consider messages put forward in news stories as more objective and credible than those found in advertisements (Ellerbach 2004). In the case of Bifield's Great Experiences story, the subject lends itself to the news story criteria of oddity and emotion, and it could be billed as a trends or a corporate culture story. Its presentation, however, easily thrusts it into promotional news territory. The reporter provides no context beyond Bifield's business plan; again, there is no mention if this is a growing trend or if statistics show employees perform better when rewarded. These are simple elements that if included would have fleshed out the story to make it less advertisement-like and more like a news story. "The issue is really what best serves the reader," said Wycliff. "The calculation here must be which is greater in a specific case: the good the information will do for the reader versus the damage that it may inure to the news organization and its credibility?" (Wycliff 2007). The credibility of a news organization, however, is not won or lost on a single story, but gradually earned over time by presenting solid journalism, or, conversely, gradually eroded over time by routinely filling pages with quasi-journalism (Meyer 2004).

In a similar example, store owner Len Cote used the same strategy as Bifield when he opened a second location of his popular Ottawa smoke shop,

Puffalot. He cold-called a reporter at the *Ottawa Citizen* and pitched his story – that being that he had just opened a new outlet in Orleans, a suburb of Ottawa. Despite there being no real news value to the story about a new business opening, the reporter agreed to go out to his store and write a news article. When the story, “Orleans smoke shop raises profile of cannabis” (Morin 2005, A9) ran in the *Ottawa Citizen* on Jan. 23, 2005, Cote said that while it was not written the way he had imagined it, “the end result was definitely good” (Cote 2007). The article provided readers with a street address for Cote’s business and details of what he sells, all in the lead paragraph: “It’s called Puffalot: A new store on St. Joseph Boulevard in Orleans that sells pipes, rolling paper, gram scales and bongs (multiple user water pipes) – everything needed to smoke marijuana, except the actual weed” (Morin A9). In the concluding paragraph, the reporter gives readers explicit directions on how to get to Puffalot: “The Orleans Puffalot opened in mid-December, a short distance from Place d’Orleans, and next door to the constituency office of Liberal MP Marc Godbout” (Morin A9). While it may be interesting that the smoke shop is next door to the office of a federal politician, the reporter provides neither context in the way of the legal status of marijuana in Canada nor comment from MP Godbout. As presented, it only offers explicit directions to the store. Cote says he does not advertise in mainstream newspapers because it is too expensive, but the *Ottawa Citizen* article “definitely got the word out and helped increase business” (Cote 2007).

According to journalism and ethics expert Wycliff (2007), it is difficult to justify the news value in this particular story because other than it being a smoke shop, which is moderately unusual, but a completely legal and fairly common business in larger cities across the country, there is really nothing newsworthy about it. “Again it comes down to what good the information will do for the reader and what the damage to the news organization and its credibility may be. This is another poor attempt at executing journalism” (Wycliff 2007).

The stories selected as the final two examples for this chapter were chosen because they are a reflection of the commonality found in the bulk of the data

collected for this thesis. The majority of the promotional stories have little context and almost no depth, but all appear in the news sections of metropolitan dailies. For example, in the Oct. 20, 2005 *Calgary Herald*, a story with the headline “Ex-U.S. leader buys art in city” ran on page A3. This page is traditionally reserved for some of the biggest news events of the day, second only to the front page (Wycliff 2007). While it is an interesting story containing the element of celebrity about former U.S. president Bill Clinton and actress Angelina Jolie buying artwork while visiting Calgary on separate trips, it does little more than raise the profile of the galleries in which the two shopped. In fact, the readers would be better served if this story appeared on the cover of the entertainment section. Instead, it was on the second most prominent news page of the newspaper and was nothing more than a celebrity sighting. The story told how both Clinton and Jolie shopped at Artists of the World and the Auburn Saloon. Both galleries received very flattering press in the story and Artists of the World even had its address mentioned. “After a half-hour tour of the three-storey shop at 514 11th Ave. S.W., Clinton settled on two pieces from the more than 3,000 available . . .” (*Calgary Herald* 2005, A3). The mention of the address instantly elevates the promotional tone beyond that of the journalistic importance of the story (Steele 2008).

The final example is also from the *Calgary Herald*. Again, there is very little context, background or contrasting opinion in “Just for Teachers,” a story extolling the virtues of a multivitamin designed for stressed out school teachers that ran on Oct. 29, 2005. The reporter writes that the vitamins were launched by a Baltimore natural supplements company in an attempt to help school teachers by offering them a “daily dose of 21 vitamins, minerals and herbs chosen for their potential to combat the fatigue and stresses teachers face corralling classrooms full of children and teens” (Staples 2005, A15). Billed as a “workplace health aid,” the story stresses the vitamin is from a full line of products specifically designed for professionals such as teachers, police officers, fire fighters, ambulance workers and nurses. The story concludes by telling readers how to purchase the product: “the company is taking orders from curious Canadians by phone and online at www.teachersvitamins.com,

and is seeking registration for the product and a retail distribution partner in Canada” (Staples A15). This story has little or no news value — the launch of a new multivitamin hardly constitutes hard news — nor does it provide a public service in any way. The reporter provided no context and had no other sources to provide a counter opinion on the virtues of taking vitamins. Furthermore, by providing a line on exactly how the vitamins can be purchased, the story easily enters the realm of promotional news.

All of the stories presented in this chapter, save for the first one, “Accused Hutu appears in court” (Curry and Thanh Ha 2005), which served as the standard against which all of the other stories collected for this thesis were compared to, provide readers with concrete examples of the common elements found in promotional journalism, namely, product placement in the form of both actual products or individual businesses (Knight 2007). Further, they show how the reporting affirms and legitimizes corporate practices as the stories link advice giving to business interests in individualized terms (Knight 2007). All of the stories lack context and comment from independent sources, and most fail to meet any of the criteria of journalism as outlined earlier in this chapter. Some of these examples would be nothing more than a few sentences if the promotional sections were removed, and while a few could stand alone without the promotional aspects, the reporters chose to include lengthy and persuasive passages and the editors failed to remove or change anything.

The following chapter tackles the topic of why promotional journalism occurs.

Chapter 3

How and why promotional journalism occurs

The purpose of this chapter is to answer the question of why promotional journalism stories are boldly appearing in the more traditional news sections of Canadian newspapers. Several theories and explanations exist, and in this chapter three will be investigated in order to determine if a single reason holds the answer. Or if it is a combination of factors.

The three theories are: 1) the increased savvy and influence of the public relations firm, its practitioners and the press releases they issue (Wycliff 2007 and Steele 2008); 2) the increased power and acceptance of the advertorial-style news story (Ellerbach 2004 and Welch 2008); and 3) dwindling financial resources, resulting in fewer reporters to cover the news (Greenwald and Bernt 2000, Downie and Kaiser 2002, Dornan 2003, DeLorme and Fedler 2004, Welch 2008).

Through the course of the analysis in this chapter, this thesis establishes that all three factors in concert provide an explanation for the occurrence of promotional journalism, and that each one on its own does not have the strength to influence the industry.

Public relations and press releases

Several examples will be presented to demonstrate the saliency of the first point — that the strength and influence of public relations firms has allowed them to evolve into powerful machines that now easily help establish what is news.

The first example is a story that was covered nationwide when Air France flight 358 slid off the end of a runway at Toronto's Pearson International Airport before ploughing down a ravine and catching fire (Canwest News Service 2005). The crash-landing of a large, commercial airliner in Canada is rare and the coverage was widespread with stories appearing in all of the major dailies and many of the second-and-third-tier ones as well. A basic search using the terms "crash" and "Air France" and "Toronto" of the web-based Infomart site, an electronic database that

archives news stories from Canadian newspapers, produced 95 stories in the two-month period following the incident (Infomart 2008). Obviously, the enormity of the event lent itself to dozens of follow-up stories that subsequently played out in newspapers following the accident. One of the common follow-up stories that garnered national coverage concerned a class-action lawsuit being filed by passengers who were aboard the ill-fated flight. Again, this story was widely covered with headlines such as: "Passenger launches lawsuit" (*Canadian Press/Calgary Herald* 2005); "Lawyer says crash offers 'a nice case' for lawsuits" (*National Post* 2005); "Air France suit to expand" (*Windsor Star* 2005); "Pearson crash suit emerges" (*Toronto Star* 2005); "Air France suit expected to grow" (*Canadian Press Newswire* 2005); "Storsberg onboard Air France lawsuit: \$150 million class-action launched after crash" (*Windsor Star* 2005). These are just a sampling of the lawsuit follow-up stories that appeared in print in the wake of news coverage of the accident (Infomart 2008).

The impetus behind the class-action story, however, is not as innocent as it may first appear. It did not come about because of the hard work of journalists who were interviewing passengers following the crash, nor did a passenger contact the newspaper with their claim. In fact, it was the work of a public relations firm and a law firm that engineered the entire event, ultimately using the press to get their message out to passengers who were on the flight. For lawyers who specialize in personal injury cases, the crash mainly meant one thing — the possibility of a huge class-action lawsuit.

Paul Miller, a partner in the law firm WILL Barristers: Morin & Miller, had a feeling that the fireball he could see from his downtown Toronto office tower likely meant a new and lucrative legal case was on its way. In fact, the lawyer who specializes in personal injury and property loss, and who is one of 35 co-counsel involved in the trillion-dollar lawsuit seeking damages on behalf of the family members of the victims of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, said his phone started ringing within half an hour of the crash. On the other end of the line was his law firm's American counterpart telling him to "go get the crash case" (Miller 2007).

Having experience in how to handle the situation, Miller's firm contacted a public relations firm that, in turn, crafted a detailed plan to generate "tasteful" (Miller 2007) media coverage with the intention of bringing injured passengers on board to file a class-action lawsuit. It should be noted at this point that only one person is needed to file a class-action lawsuit.

What the public relations firm did first was blanket Toronto media outlets with press releases announcing Miller's law firm would be holding a "town hall meeting" to inform passengers from Air France flight 358 of their rights. That piece of information was included as a paragraph in many of the immediate follow-up stories to the crash, including a story in the *National Post* headlined, "Lawyer says crash offers 'a nice case' for lawsuits" (Stinson 2005, A5). According to Miller, the idea was that the town hall meeting would likely secure at least one client who would be in favour of filing a lawsuit. With that person signed on, they could then issue a second press release saying a lawsuit was in the works with the hope that subsequent coverage would, in turn, generate more clients (Miller 2007).

The plan worked. Within five days of the crash, Miller had found a passenger, Suzanne Deak, who first heard about the town hall meeting from a Toronto newspaper (Miller 2007). She agreed to sign on as the lone plaintiff for the suit. That gave Miller the power to file legal papers in the Ontario Superior Court of Justice stating Deak's intention to pursue a class-action lawsuit against Air France and the Toronto Pearson International Airport Authority. Once that was done, his firm's public relations practitioners issued further press releases announcing a lawsuit was underway. Again the story was successfully played out in newspapers across the country with such headlines as, "Passenger launches lawsuit" (*Calgary Herald* 2005).

"We were inundated with calls [from passengers] after the initial [town hall meeting] article ran," said Miller (2007). "We made a conscious decision to pitch the story to newspapers as news. Getting the story in the papers replaces the need to place an ad and if we know we can get it for free, why would we pay for it?" (Miller 2007). But more important, Miller points out that having newspapers run news stories allows them to hide the law firm's motive, which in this case was finding clients

to build a case, which would in turn earn them money and a higher profile. “We have found over the years that Canadians find advertising by lawyers to be vulgar and distasteful, they don’t like it, but if the ‘advertisement’ is contained in a news story, we are usually flooded with calls — those stories have a huge impact for our business” (Miller 2007). As an aside, Miller also picked up six new clients for a Vioxx class-action lawsuit he is working on. In those instances, the people calling about Vioxx, a once-popular drug used to treat arthritis that has since been pulled from shelves because people began suffering from side effects such as heart attacks and strokes, called Miller after reading his name in the Air France story hoping he would know who was handling the class-action lawsuit against the drug maker.

Clearly, in this example, the lawyers and the public relations practitioners skilfully used the media to engineer promotional news coverage they knew would exact the results they wanted. “Promotionalism entails the management of public presence and the attempt to translate this presence into an asset that serves the corporation’s economic success and continuity” (Knight and Greenburg 2002, 545). This is precisely what Miller’s public relations firm accomplished. And while there is no argument that the class-action lawsuit itself is a news story that should be covered, the original premise for the piece is one that needs to be examined. Miller openly acknowledges the plan was calculated and that they were using reporters to get their message out instead of taking out advertisements, both due to the cost and because it would be viewed as “vulgar” (Miller 2007).

The proper protocol for this story should have been for the law firm to place advertisements with the local media outlets and for reporters to attend the town hall meeting and cover the event from that perspective (Wycliff 2007). While some may argue the end result would be the same — ultimately reporters would have produced news stories about the meeting and the lawsuit — it is the principle of the matter that is under examination here. With the law firm openly admitting its plan, this stands as a good example of how businesses use the media to produce the coverage they want and need.

What makes this story a good example of press release reporting is that it

shows it can be a very fine line between news and advertising. The entire premise for the story is a bit askew: the law firm was trolling for clients and the best way to secure them was through the news, therefore they created a story to serve their needs. Because the end goal, and only goal, of the law firm was to profit from the publication of the story, they should have taken out an advertisement in the newspaper to announce the information session. While some may argue that the breaking news aspect of the ongoing Air France coverage could be a reason for overlooking the strategic nature of the press release regarding the town hall meeting, this thesis submits it is no excuse. If newspapers cannot be expected to uphold the standards of journalism during times of breaking news, what is the point of journalism at all? The skills of those in marketing and public relations are increasingly becoming more enhanced and more adept at placing information, ideas, and news of events in the media than in decades past; public relations is a field in which the skills of the practitioners can produce heightened results (Steele 2008).

This combination of complacency by reporters and editors to accept press releases as largely unbiased information, and the skill of public relations practitioners to swiftly issue creative, influential and effective press releases creates a disservice to readers. It is difficult to know within the context of this study, if an e-mail or phone call from the law firm would have received the same treatment as the news release as no research has been done on that topic and therefore cannot be discussed at this time.

Next, an example of how reporting directly from a press release produces a highly promotional story is found in a Nov. 9, 2005, article from page A5 of the *Calgary Herald* headlined, "Legacy, tech touted in Bay's Olympic line" (Greenwood and Leong 2005). The story features the unveiling of Team Canada's 2006 winter Olympic uniforms, which in and of itself has news value since it was the first time in many years that the Hudson's Bay Company outbid Roots for the right to design and sell the always-popular and much-coveted uniform pieces.

Where the story crosses the line into the realm of promotional journalism is when the reporters announce the items are available for the public to purchase

exclusively at Hudson's Bay Company stores across the country, followed by descriptions of the clothing for sale. Beyond that, the descriptions and quotes within the story are taken directly from a press release. For example, one paragraph reads: "The duds combine 'fashion and function, with a distinct take on both Canadian heritage and modern, high-tech, high-performance winter sports wear,' HBC said in a written release" (Greenwood and Leong 2005). Furthermore, HBC chief executive George Heller is quoted from the press release as saying the company's winning bid to design the uniforms is "a great marketing vehicle." His comments are double-edged. Indeed, winning the bid allows HBC to market itself, it also means every news outlet in the country at some point is going to mention that the clothing is available at Hudson's Bay Company stores and if those stories are merely a re-writing of the press release, as this example is, then the department store has yet another reason to celebrate. This story is a further example of reporters treating press releases as unbiased information that does not need to be challenged or questioned. Simply inputting information from a press release distributed by a retail outlet, no less, directly into a news story not only fails the reader, but the newspaper itself (Wycliff 2007). Had this story contained more context by way of reporting on both the great coup of HBC earning the contract to produce the Olympic uniforms over Roots, and fresh interviews from both companies, it would have been far less promotional in nature.

Moreover, this story demonstrates the reliance newspapers place on press releases to provide not only story ideas, but the story itself. Studies conducted to determine exactly how influential public relations practitioners are in constructing the news have found that about 60 per cent of the news in newspapers is taken directly from press releases (DeLorme and Fedler 2004). Some critics contend that "without PR practitioners . . . the city's daily newspapers would have to double the size of their staffs" (DeLorme and Fedler 2004, 112). The press release is so omnipresent in today's newspaper climate that it is as though reporters have forgotten that a press release is not unbiased information, but rather generated to manipulate the facts and put forward only one side of the story.

The final examples of press release reporting are two stories that announce Air Canada's decision to add new routes to its schedule. In a Sept. 19, 2005, *Ottawa Citizen* story headlined, "Air Canada adds new Ottawa flights" (*Ottawa Citizen* 2005, D2) and in a Feb. 18, 2006, *Globe and Mail* story headlined, "Air Canada adds express route from Alberta to Newfoundland" (Armstrong 2006, A15), the new routes are highlighted as though it is a truly remarkable thing that the airline is flying to these destinations. Rather, one could argue, changing routes and adding and subtracting routes is a matter of course for an airline. Despite that, a journalist at the *Ottawa Citizen* reports: "Air Canada Jazz will operate 50-seat regional jets on four daily non-stop flights between Hamilton and Montreal and three daily direct flights between Ottawa and Hamilton" (*Ottawa Citizen* D2). The *Globe and Mail* story reports: "Air Canada plans to start same-plane flights from the oil-rich northeastern Alberta city [For McMurray] to St. John's. With the new express flights, a passenger can leave St. John's at 7:15 a.m. and be on the ground in Fort McMurray just after noon. Previously, the cross country flight took the entire day. The flight from Fort McMurray to Toronto will be direct. After a brief stop in Toronto, the flight will continue to St. John's" (Armstrong A15). All of this information is gleaned from press releases issued by Air Canada and an airline spokeswoman said they were pleased with the positive news coverage each announcement received (Arthur 2007). While the flight information is merely facts gleaned from press releases, it is worth considering if these two stories are even newsworthy as presented. This type of information could easily reach as many people if it was in the form of an advertisement taken out and paid for by the airline. However, because an editor or reporters decided to write the stories as news, both could be given context by the addition of why Air Canada has chosen these routes instead of others and what it may or may not mean for the cities and passengers who will take advantage of the changes.

Certainly, there is an impact on a city when an airline increases its traffic to and from it: it affects the tourism industry and business sector, not to mention the residents who will fly the new routes. But simply regurgitating facts from a press

release does not make it a worthwhile news story. Perhaps these stories would have been better served in the travel section of the newspaper, where such information is viewed as a type of “reader service” (Summerfield 2008).

These four stories are examples of how press releases impact news coverage. The Air France story is a carefully-crafted plan to use the media, while the Olympic apparel and Air Canada stories are more or less reproductions of press releases. The end result, however, is essentially the same. Each story is a promotional piece for the company which issued the press release. One story did the dirty work for the announcement of the Air France town hall meeting, another flogged clothing for the the Hudson’s Bay Company and lastly, two advertised new air routes for Air Canada. “If reporters are working only from the information provided in a press release, a story will fall short in accuracy and it will fall short in factual value” (Steele 2008). While the stories contain facts that are not necessarily inaccurate — the price of Olympic clothing pieces, flight times and destinations — the stories remain one-sided and, in some cases under-researched, therefore falling short of accuracy because the other side remains unknown. Furthermore, reporting from press releases is not only poorly executed journalism, but lazy journalism (Wycliff 2007, Welch 2008 and Steele 2008).

Advertorial-style journalism

Agencies such as lawyer Paul Miller’s public relations firm are relying on the basic premise that “the closer the (advertising) message gets to being construed as objective journalism, the more credibility the message will have” (Ellerbach 2004, 62). Dressing up promotional material as objective journalism is the best way “to sell” an idea or product (Miller 2007). This idea is, in part, tied to reporting directly from press releases. Reporters who compose stories based solely on the information collected from the press releases issued by businesses, end up producing the equivalent of an advertorial. When a company issues a press release that is either favourable to the business or a specific product or one that highlights an event they want covered, and the reporter who is assigned the story decides, for

whatever reason, to work only within the parameters of that information, the result is, in effect, a free advertorial.

By definition, an advertorial is a paid “advertisement often thinly disguised as legitimate news matter” and is considered “one of the fastest growing media trends in the advertising industry over the past decade” (Ellerbach 2004, 61 and 62). Advertorials are normally easy to identify. They are packaged like news stories, with a type face that differs only slightly from the one used for the news copy, and they are normally accompanied by the disclaimers, “This is a paid advertisement” or “Advertisement.” When a reporter writes a story with no information beyond what is included in the press release and it is run as news on the regular news pages, those being the A-section or the City section, it has the same effect, or better, as a paid advertorial or advertisement (Wycliff 2007). “A newsroom that doesn’t dig deep for some of its news is saying, in effect, that all the important news is at or near the surface. This, of course, defies logic and common sense as surely as it fails our citizenry” (Greenwald and Bernt and Roberts 2000, vii).

An example of an advertorial-style news story is from the Nov. 12, 2005, *Calgary Herald*, “Antiques roadshow for toys hits Calgary” (Knapp 2005, B10). The story is short and punchy and asks readers questions such as, “Got a box of G.I. Joes in the attic? How about a suitcase of Barbies and all of her accoutrements tucked under the stairs? Ever dreamed of turning those kiddie icons into cash?” (Knapp B10). The reporter continues by telling readers they can stop by a city hotel between, “9 a.m. and 7 p.m. at the Four Points by Sheraton at 8220 Bowridge Cres. N.W.” where collectors are waiting to “on the spot pay U.S. cash for them [toys]” (Knapp B10). Once again, this is a story that is short on context, but long on details for anyone wanting to participate in the event.

From the evidence presented thus far, it can be seen how the first factor, reporting from press releases, flows into the second, reporters producing advertorial-style journalism. This situation arises repeatedly in the data collected for this thesis; advertorial-like stories are consistently produced from press releases.

Dwindling newsroom resources

A popular theory current in journalism today is that newspapers are no longer putting resources into multi-part, project-news stories or investigative pieces, but instead are moving more towards the “quick hit” story. It is argued that this is due, in part, to a steady decline of the financial resources being invested in editorial departments. “Under-staffed, under-financed newsrooms are commonplace (Greenwald and Bernt 2000, viii).

Newspapers have already been struggling for several years to find their place in an age of constantly evolving technology, but combine that with a severe downturn in the economy that has resulted in layoffs and cutbacks at papers across the country — Canwest in November 2008, SunMedia in December 2008, the *Globe and Mail* in January 2009 and Torstar in February 2009 — and newspapers are now faced with the reality that money will not be invested in newsrooms to strengthen news and information-gathering capabilities. Many are even worried about being shut down altogether, as the *Halifax Daily News* was in early 2008. In the U.S.:

the newspaper death watch has become something of a national parlour game . . . In (March 2009), Time magazine ran a piece that listed the 10 major U.S. papers to most likely abandon their print operations next In Colorado, the Rocky Mountain News, Denver’s No. 2 paper, closed abruptly at the end of (February). The Seattle Post-Intelligencer, a Hearst title, (published its final print copy in March 2009) and moved exclusively online after the company (could not) find a buyer. Major publishers in Philadelphia and Minneapolis have been forced to seek bankruptcy protection from creditors. The Boston-based Christian Science Monitor has abandoned its print operations entirely, while papers in Detroit are publishing print copies only a few days a week. And several newspapers in Ohio, New York and Maryland have created content-sharing agreements in a desperate attempt to defray costs (Roberston and Sinclair 2009).

The “gutting” of newspaper staffs has Canadian union leaders calling the layoffs “tragic” and a threat to democracy (Honywill 2009). While the long-term

outcome of shedding so many jobs so quickly remains to be seen, the immediate consequence is editors and reporters trying to produce the same amount of news while increasing their online presence with having even fewer resources to do so.

The irony is that in their haste both to cut newsroom costs and ramp up Web operations, some newspapers are slashing newsroom staff and running the survivors ragged. At many dailies, today's reporter is often pressed into Web service: writing frequent updates on breaking stories, wire service fashion; posting blog items; and conducting interviews with a video camera. If journalism is degraded into mere bloggery, newspapers will lose their competitive edge (Kuttner 2007, 26).

Considering that Kuttner (2007) made the above observation a year and a half before the North American economy slid into a "deep recession" (National Bank of Canada 2009) and newspapers began to make sweeping cutbacks, the prognosis will likely only worsen.

Michael Den Tandt is the managing editor of the *Owen Sound Sun Times*, a small daily in southern Ontario owned by SunMedia. He is also a former *Globe and Mail* political reporter, once stationed on Parliament Hill, as well as a former writer for the same paper's editorial board. In the three years he has been running the *Sun Times*'s newsroom, his efforts to improve both the quantity and quality of news in the paper have been hampered by cutbacks delegated by executives at SunMedia. The operation was hard hit by SunMedia's December 2008 decision to layoff 575 full-time employees, and Den Tandt has described the *Sun Times* as being in "survival mode" (Den Tandt 2009). With only three reporters and two photographers left, staff are working hard to fill the gaps, resorting to regularly rewriting press releases as a means of filling smaller news holes, in addition to writing between two and three news stories a day to fill the larger gaps.

"Right now, we cannot give our reporters the time and resources they need to do more indepth reporting, we do not have the time, money or people to allow that to happen," said Den Tandt (2009) immediately after the layoffs took place.

“My goal is to keep the quality of news as solid as ever, but with only three reporters, who need days off and vacations, we really don’t have the time to do much beyond hunker down and survive the year” (Den Tandt 2009).

Until recently, the push was for newspapers to protect themselves by providing an even more reputable, well-researched product by “investing more dollars in their newsrooms to strengthen their news and information-gathering prosperity whatever directions that information distribution may take” (Greenwald and Berbt 2000, viii). However, that is clearly no longer an option at this time.

Instead, newspapers are tending towards the “news-you-can-use” trend (Welch 2008). Mary Agnes Welch, president of the Canadian Association of Journalists and a reporter with the *Winnipeg Free Press*, says that today “rather than investigative journalism, reporters are doing too much ‘news you can use.’ Sure it’s useful, and addresses daily life and pop culture journalism, but the larger question is: Why are reporters and editors leaning more and more towards that type of journalism?” (Welch 2008). Welch says she feels it is partially due to newspapers failing to hire enough staff to cover the news of the day, instead asking the few to do the work of the many (Welch 2008). The result is reporters seeking out quantity over quality, meaning the shorter, easier and lighter the story, the faster it can be written and the sooner the reporter can move onto the next piece. Those are the stories, however, that tend to be largely promotional in nature, that are reported directly from a press release, that are presented unchallenged, without outside sources, without context or depth.

A political economy theory on this topic states that most newspaper owners and publishers have forced their editors to focus more on the bottom line than on good journalism (Downie and Kaiser 2002). Consequently, newspapers have tried to attract readers with light features and stories, all the while de-emphasizing serious reporting on business, government, the country and the world because it costs more to produce those stories (Downie and Kaiser 2002).

The result is “a decline of governmental coverage at all levels” — national, provincial and local — and “investigative reporting has come under similar pressure.

Some of this is due to cost cutting, some is due to the belief that readers find government news and long stories, even investigative ones, to be turn-offs and do not want them” (Greenwald and Bernt 2000, viii).

The civic and commercial essence of a newspaper is its ability to collect news and information and present it intelligently, fairly and engagingly. A good newspaper must have a broad definition of news. It must do indepth investigative and project stories, revealing events and trends and developments that otherwise would not be known or made clear to the public. It must not neglect government or elections or civic, business or social institutions. It must cover the kind of news that oozes, as well as breaks, outside as well as inside these institutions (Greenwald and Bernt 2000, viii).

It may seem dire, but: “By the usual indicators, daily newspapers are in a deepening downward spiral. The new year brought reports of more newsroom layoffs, dwindling print circulation, flat or declining ad sales, increasing defections of readers and advertisers to the Internet, and sullen investors (Kuttner 2007, 24). Almost two years later the prognosis is even worse as newspapers throughout North America suffer the effects of deep cutbacks as owners struggle to keep their businesses viable.

An analysis

The combination of these three elements as presented in this chapter, with story examples and analysis from industry and academic experts and journalists, provides an explanation as to how and why promotional journalism occurs. This thesis acknowledges that when examined individually, none of the three factors has enough depth to offer a credible explanation on its own. But when woven together, each flows into the other, showing how the cumulative effect results in an explanation for the topic at hand. The value of each press release must be carefully assessed before a story is written exclusively from the information contained within it, as this thesis contends reporting directly from press releases, especially those issued by

businesses, results in something akin to advertorial-style journalism. For example, a press release announcing new airline routes will result in a promotional story if reported directly from the release, whereas a press release from a local health unit announcing new cancer statistics will not.

Once the aforementioned set of components has been established as a plausible and credible explanation for the occurrence of promotional journalism, additional theories can be applied. One such concept is the move towards newspaper's producing more "news you can use" (Welch 2008), a reporting style that can be explained, in part, by the above three factors and as a response to a changing society based heavily on consumer consumption (Knight 2007). Some academic experts say newspapers are merely adapting to societal changes, providing readers with useful, utilitarian copy that can help ease the burden of their busy lives by telling them up front what they need and how they can get it (Eide and Knight 1999). One example of a story genre that is appearing more frequently today in a promotional format than, say 30 years ago (Knight 2007), is the health-related news story. "Its growing presence in news coverage is a major area where both service and promotional journalism occurs" (Knight 2007). A 2005 content readership survey conducted by the NAD Bank database shows 37 per cent of daily newspaper readers "usually" read health news. Health-related news is therefore more popular than sports news, according to the study, which reported that 35 per cent of readers "usually" read the sports section.

Health stories often focus on emerging private clinics and the cost of services offered to the individual, or new drugs that are on the market. For example, a June 14, 2005, *Ottawa Citizen* story that appeared on the front of the City section contained the headline, "Gatineau clinic looks to Ontario for patients" (Lackner 2005, C1). The story provided readers with all of the information they would need if they wanted to book and pay for a MRI at the new private clinic, including the cost, the opening date of the clinic and its street location. The lead paragraph was as follows: "The region's second private MRI clinic, opening this summer in Gatineau, will rely heavily on business from patients looking to bypass Ontario's lengthy waiting lists"

(Lackner C1). Two paragraphs later, readers are told, “Nine specialists, including radiologists and psychiatrists, have invested \$2 million in a new MRI facility on St. Joseph Boulevard, in Gatineau’s Hull sector. The facility is expected to open at the end of August. An MRI will cost between \$700 and \$800” (Lackner C1).

According to Steele (2008), some of this reporting falls into what he calls “consumer-benefit-added-value.” By asking the questions: Is there a consumer benefit to providing information about this product or service in a news story?; and, What is the journalistic value added to the story by including this information?, Steele (2008) determines if the reporter crosses the line into “selling” the product or not. “In journalism we sometimes get caught in that trap of including it [promotional news elements] because it gives readers more information. Consumer reporting, to some degree, is reasonable. It helps us find products we are looking for, but the danger is, of course, that we get into a position where we tout things because it’s value added or consumer value, and we aren’t rigorous in enforcing that point. Health or safety stories are good examples of journalism that gets too promotional” (Steele 2008). According to Steele, things such as precise addresses do not need to be mentioned, however, he feels in this example, the price of an MRI is an interesting point that should be included as the prices of medical services in Canada are not widely known.

In a second example, a July 14, 2005, *Globe and Mail* story appeared on the front page with the headline, “Private clinic in Toronto to offer costly cancer drugs” (Abraham 2005, A1). The story’s lead paragraph again announces the opening of another new clinic: “A private Toronto clinic is set to open next month offering cancer patients who can afford it access to high-priced new drugs the public system does not fund” (Abraham A1). Again, two paragraphs later, the reporter writes: “Calling itself Provis, the downtown day clinic intends to offer at least six new cancer treatments. While the drugs are approved for use by Health Canada, they are not funded by Ontario and may never be” (Abraham A1). While the promotional aspects of this story cater only to those who are fighting cancer and who can afford medications that cost “as much as \$45,000 a year” (Abraham A1), one could argue

that there is still a market to be found in the *Globe and Mail's* readership (Steele 2008).

When contacted, the executive chairman of the Provis group of private medical clinics said the *Globe and Mail* story and other news stories about the clinics only help business, and this despite only taking patients by referral (Rubinoff 2008). "We have a lot of clinics and any time a news story can make potential patients more aware of services and treatments out there for them, we feel it is a good thing" (Rubinoff 2008). "We believe in empowering patients to make choices and news stories are one way of having that happen because the more people who know about our services the better. You know the saying, 'We don't care what you write about us, just write about us,' well, that applies to us as well" (Rubinoff 2008). According to Rubinoff (2008), they do not keep statistics on how patients first hear about their clinics, but he strongly believes a portion of them learn about Provis clinics from news stories. More importantly, having the clinics mentioned in the news alerts physicians to the services, which can then lead to an increase in referrals and a subsequent financial gain.

The third example of promotional health reporting may be the story that includes the most information for potential patients to access private clinics just by reading a news story. The story appeared in the April 28, 2006, *Ottawa Citizen* on page A1 with the headline, "Thriving private clinic in Gatineau is set to hire 2 more doctors, find larger building" (Rogers 2006, A1). The story tells readers the "private medical clinic in Gatineau charges up to \$300 a visit" and "expects to more than triple the number of regular patients by early 2007" (Rogers A1). Further, it goes on to tell readers who the owner is and the name of the company, "Marcelin Chaumont, 55, owner of Sentinell Sante Health Group" and the clinic location, "Taschereau Street in Hull" (Rogers A1). Beyond that, however, it includes addresses for three other private clinics in the same area: "Two MRI clinics opened within the past three months: MRI St-Joseph at Taschereau and St-Joseph Boulevard and MRI Plus on Laurier Street opposite the Canadian Museum of Civilization. The first private MRI clinic in Hull, Valley MRI, opened on Papineau Street two years ago"

(Rogers 2006, A2).

This story crosses the line on how much promotional information is too much (Steele 2008). The reporter did not need to include specific addresses and directions for every private MRI clinic in Gatineau-Hull, they do not add value to the story, but instead make it a strong example of crossing the consumer-benefit-value-added line (Steele 2008).

To be sure, these stories all merit news coverage, discussions about private medical clinics in Canada are often contentious topics because of the ongoing private-public-health care debate. Consequently, any reporter who covers a story about a private clinic is likely going to have to mention the clinic's name and offer readers details on services. It is a question, however, of the tone and proportion of that information in comparison with the rest of the story that determines if it crosses into promotional journalism territory (Steele 2008). If the tone and proportion outweigh the journalistic purpose of the story, then it has done a disservice to the reader and the newspaper (Wycliff 2007 and Steele 2008) as it provides nothing more than information that could have been obtained through an advertisement.

These are but a few examples of how journalism is now investing in the "social and moral economy of everyday problems and solutions," offering "commentary and advice on the everyday concerns of their audiences" (Eide and Knight 1999, 526). Promotional journalism, then, reflects the growing emphasis not only on consumer-oriented reporting, but also on news that is framed in individualized terms, on what the individual needs to have for personal use, rather than what they need to know about current affairs (Knight 2007).

Further, it "entails the integration of different aspects or forms of communication to the extent that functional differences between them become blurred and fused" (Knight and Greenberg 2002, 545), that is to say, a reader is no longer able to distinguish between what is and is not journalism. The logic of promotionalism is that it "extends beyond the purely economic sphere to the development of modern, institutionalized practices of socialization that attempt to instil in individuals the will and ability to model their conduct in normalized, detailed and self-validating ways" (Eide

and Knight 1999, 533). Ultimately, promotionalism promotes consumerism, a point that is exemplified in promotional news stories like the Hudson's Bay Olympic clothing line, the opening of private medical clinics and even the announcement of new Air Canada routes.

This can be linked to promotional news when considering the following:

Promotionalism privileges the rhetorical aspect of communication, and this accentuates the media's didactic and inductive functions with the result that help and advice have become implicit in a range of different genres from journalism to the therapeutic television talk show . . . (Eide and Knight 1999, 533).

In fact, "the commercialization of the media as vehicles for the promotion of consumption was viewed as part of the degeneration of the liberal public sphere" (Eide and Knight 1999, 534 and Calhoun 1992 and Habermas 1989). More and more:

The media constitute only the appearance of the public sphere as the function of publicity is directed less and less to rational-critical debate and more and more to organizing consensus and affirmative feedback from the life-world to the system. Central to this is the way the media have contributed to the erosion of the strict separation of public and private, the basis of the ideal public sphere, by acting precisely as a forum for publicizing 'personal needs and difficulties' and acting as 'authorities for advice on the problems of life' (Eide and Knight 1999, 534).

While the theories suggest newspapers are merely responding to and participating in sweeping societal changes and therefore readers and journalists should be satisfied with the quality and quantity of promotional news stories because it is a reflection of their lives, this thesis contends readers, journalists and newspapers deserve better. And, while "most people today are willing to accept the intrusion of product advertising into their private and public space, in part because they're apathetic, and in part because they've come to accept that it is the

new norm” (Dahl 2005), this thesis submits that “if the public became less accepting of it [promotional news] it would change” (Dahl 2005). Promotional news treats readers like product consumers, rather than news seekers. If news can be defined as “the ultimate manifestation of a human desire to know what's going on” and news “has a power, and a value” (Downie and Kaiser 2002, 112) then where do all of the examples brought forward in this thesis fit in? Too much of what is now being offered as bona fide news is “untrustworthy, irresponsible, misleading or incomplete . . . Too many of those who own and lead the nation's news media have cynically underestimated or ignored [the] need for good journalism, and evaded their responsibility to provide it” (Downie and Kaiser 2002, 112).

Instead, newspapers have been running promotional news stories unchecked, essentially promoting corporate identities in that such identities are “signified above all by the brand name, logo or slogan” (Knight and Greenberg 2002, 546). If a story mentions a store name, such as the Hudson’s Bay Company example, or a specific product, such as the Tim Hortons’ rimroller, the story necessarily becomes promotional, highlighting how blurred the line between news and advertising is in popular culture. While many of the stories collected for this thesis have legitimate news angles, they also have other criteria in common: they all appear on the regular news pages of their respective papers; and they all contain promotional news elements. However, some are completely devoid of any news hook at all.

To be a news story, according to standard journalism criteria, a story must possess some of the following qualities: immediacy, proximity, prominence, oddity, conflict, suspense, emotions and consequence (Mencher 2003). Beyond that, it must adhere to the basic standards of journalism, to be fair, unbiased and independent. This thesis submits that news and journalism are intertwined in a co-dependent relationship and that journalism is a “discipline of verification” (Kovach and Rosentiel 2001); and beyond that, it is a “set of disciplines — habits, patterns of thought and behaviour, ethical principles — that reporters and editors use to establish what is truth and what is not, so they may then determine what is news and

what is not" (Wycliff 2007). That is to say that the two are so intimately bound that one cannot exist without the other.

Chapter 4

Reporters respond from the front lines

The inclusion of product prices, store locations, contact information and company websites, especially in the case of lifestyle features, is intended as a reader service, a courtesy of sorts. This saves them time from e-mailing or even calling the reporter directly (Robin Summerfield 2008).

As highly detailed and well-crafted press releases continue to flood into newsrooms, and with reporters relying on that information more than ever before (DeLorme and Fedler 2004), the move towards including the promotional material in stories is often justified by defining it as a “reader service” (Summerfield 2008). The rationale behind this description, as explained by newspaper reporters, is based on making journalism both convenient and user-friendly. The inclusion of promotional material means, once the story runs, reporters will not be inconvenienced by phone calls and e-mails requesting details about products, events or stores. Similarly, the story is considered user-friendly for readers when the promotional information is part of the overall story package (Summerfield 2008).

This is the explanation given by many experts and reporters as to how news stories end up riddled with promotional material. It is not, they insist, due to pressure from advertisers (Summerfield 2008 and Welch 2008). This idea is decidedly different from the commonly held belief that the relationship between advertising and editorial is quite cozy and has an effect on news coverage. Thus far, research for this thesis has found that little of promotional journalism in Canadian newspapers is a result of undue pressure from advertisers. This is significant in that it strengthens the evidence and arguments presented in Chapter 3 regarding how the three elements of press-release reporting, advertorial-style news stories and dwindling newsroom resources are three of the core reasons for promotional journalism. This is not the case in the United States, however, where the battle lines are being drawn between advertising and editorial, an issue that will be addressed later in this chapter in order

to show the differences and what can happen.

A reader service

There is a public perception that those who advertise in newspapers also wield considerable influence over the editorial content; that advertisers have the power to quash stories that may portray their products, company or events in a negative light. That they can request positive news stories pertaining to their business or that they are guaranteed favourable coverage when they have an announcement to make.

The reality, however, is seemingly the opposite at Canadian metropolitan dailies. While the Canadian Association of Journalists keeps no data on pressure from advertisers, CAJ president Mary Agnes Welch says advertising pressure “happens, in really tiny incremental ways in a newsroom” (2008), and the “lines are very clear between editorial and advertising” (2008). The bigger concern, says Welch (2008), is “that readers assume way more collusion between advertisers and reporters, and that kind of pressure is very rare.” The CAJ is currently working on a new policy on editorial independence, one that “expands on the code of conduct and rules pertaining to advertorials and the lines that should not be crossed between departments at newspapers” (Welch 2008). The revised policy came about originally, according to Welch (2008), because CAJ members “got fed up with seeing advertorials that look exactly like editorial content.” In other words, the line between the two was becoming blurred to the point where the masquerade act of the paid advertorial was too convincing.

Outside of addressing these concerns, Welch (2008) says it ultimately boils down to editorial independence. For example, the *Toronto Star* runs a section every weekend called “Shopping,” which is dedicated entirely to new merchandise, stores and shopping events in the city — other newspapers have similar sections, but often with different names. “Frankly, the ‘Shopping’ section is a big problem because it is essentially all advertising, but we have to ask ourselves, is it influenced, or editorial generated,” says Welch (2008). If the stories in the section are not

influenced, then the CAJ is willing to overlook it. "If we have to draw a line, it would be that we always want those decisions [about what to cover] to be the decisions of the reporter" (Welch 2008). The editor of the *Toronto Star's* Shopping section, Lesley Taylor (2007), was contacted by e-mail for this thesis, but declined to comment, saying instead she was deeply insulted the section was considered promotional.

A senior lifestyle reporter and columnist for the *Calgary Herald*, however, took a different approach to an interview request. Robin Summerfield has worked at the *Calgary Herald* since 1998 as both a city news reporter and a lifestyle reporter, splitting her time thus far equally between the two disciplines. She also writes a popular, weekly trends column called "Noted." As a news reporter, Summerfield was assigned to major, breaking news stories, such as the massive forest fires that consumed much of southern Alberta during the summer of 2003 (Summerfield 2003) and the 2004 avalanche that killed seven people on a backcountry adventure outing (Summerfield 2004). She was also the post-secondary beat reporter, covering news from Calgary's many schools, including the University of Calgary, Mount Royal College and the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology. During that time she broke stories that were later widely covered by other city news outlets, such as a story out of the U of C about the student council surreptitiously receiving funding from a large tobacco company (Summerfield 2003).

In 2004, Summerfield moved to the *Calgary Herald's* features department, where she became a lead writer in the Real Life section. Her focus shifted from researching and writing traditional news stories to contemplating the latest trends in everything from diet crazes and exercise regimes, to the opening of boutique bakeshops and breakfast diners. "Writing for a lifestyle section is decidedly different than writing for the news. The stories aren't necessarily hooked to the news, yet they often examine the trends behind the news" (Summerfield 2008). The range of stories they cover in the Real Life section varies greatly. For example, after a triple murder of a family in southern Alberta in which the daughter and her boyfriend were accused of killing her brother and parents, Summerfield wrote a piece about

parenting and troubled teens (Summerfield 2006). For everyday stories, however, Summerfield writes about everything and anything, including: the etiquette behind sending wedding invites online, marvellous muffins, alternative medicines, store openings, and the pros and cons of the spray-on tan. Many of these stories include promotional elements in the way of prices, product descriptions and store locations. A July 8, 2005, story, for example, about a popular Calgary cosmetics store opening a second location provides readers with all of the details they need about when and where it will be opening (Summerfield 2005).

“The inclusion of product prices, store locations, contact information and company websites, especially in the case of lifestyle features, is intended as a reader service, a courtesy of sorts. This saves them time from e-mailing or even calling the reporter directly. We have found that [readers] generally want this information, even in times where the reporter/columnist has written something less than favourable about a company, service or product” (Summerfield 2008). She goes on to say that the promotional elements of the stories are wholly at the discretion of the newspaper and not at the request of advertisers. Further, the “[promotional] information is not automatically included in every story. There is some discretion depending on the tone of the article” (Summerfield 2008). “If I was writing a trend and health story about the popularity of plastic surgery and I quoted a surgeon, I wouldn’t include contact information for the surgeon, but if I was writing about the resurgence of the retro-hip cupcake and quoted a couple of local bake shops, I would include their contact information” (Summerfield 2008). The reasoning behind such a decision, Summerfield explains, relates to the number of readers who would be interested in obtaining the contact information — in this case, she expects that more people will likely go to the cupcake store than have cosmetic surgery. This comes back to the concept of promotional journalism as a convenience and reader service.

Incorporating promotional material in stories for the Real Life section and other lifestyle sections is now second nature for reporters, those details are, quite simply, crucial elements, much like answering who, what, where, when and why for a

standard news story (Summerfield 2008). While this format may now be considered acceptable in lifestyle writing, this thesis contends that, not only is it too much product information, but that the style has slipped into traditional news stories, where it does not belong. The fact that several sources say it is done completely independent of advertising pressure may be the only saving feature of this story format, yet it still raises concerns about the quality and future of journalism, as well as the shifting priorities of reporters.

Advertising pressure

While questions are being asked about the motivation behind the production of promotional news stories, the situation is far worse in the United States, where the problem of advertisers trying to exert control over editorial departments is much different and serves as a reminder for Canadian journalists to remain vigilant. A Pew Research Centre study found that of 300 newspaper reporters surveyed, “nearly one-half of the journalists acknowledged sometimes consciously engaging in self-censorship to serve the commercial interests of their firm or advertisers, and only one-quarter of them stated this never happened to their knowledge” (McChesney 2003, 299).

In another survey, this time of editors at daily newspapers, 90 per cent of editors said they felt pressure from advertisers to alter editorial copy, and more than one-third said “that advertisers were successful in influencing the editorial content of their newspapers” (DeLorme and Fedler 2005, 9). Poynter Institute ethics expert Bob Steele (2008) acknowledges that “sometimes it [promotional journalism] is driven by advertising features or it is driven by advertising pressure” (2008), but he goes on to say that, “it’s unfair if we gauge and build our coverage on business values rather than journalistic values and that’s the bottom line. Business shouldn’t take precedence over journalistic values.”

According to Steele (2008), one of the differences between Canada and the United States is that in that country, there are literally thousands of newspapers fighting for survival as the Internet threatens to weed them out. These “news

organizations are more inclined to cut corners on ethics, practices and quality control, and that means the erosion of the line between news and ad content and the blurring of that line” (Steele 2008). With so many newspapers vying for limited advertising revenues, there is fierce competition to secure advertisers. In doing so, some organizations are willing to compromise journalistic standards in order to keep advertisers from taking their business elsewhere if they do not receive the type of news coverage they desire.

Beyond the situation facing newspapers, U.S. magazine editors are also facing heavy pressure from advertisers who want favourable stories printed or brand names used frequently in news stories. There is pressure to “weave advertising into . . . editorial content” and turn “ads into articles”; as well, brand names appear more frequently in news articles than ever before as “advertisers (attempt) to increase the impact of their advertising spending” (Ruskin 2004). The tactics are considered a “fundamental threat to press freedom and to the integrity of American journalism” (Ruskin 2004). “If magazines become mere tout sheets for products and the interests of those who sell them, then every story will be suspect, and the reading public may have nowhere to turn for information that is truly independent of reigning commercial interests” (Ruskin 2004). The results from studies conducted on readers’ perspectives regarding advertising’s influence over editorial content can be broken down into three categories: 1) it is just business; 2) it is more information; and, 3) the topic matters (Haley and Cunningham 2003, 179). In the end, however, readers largely “trust editors to both know their audiences and to provide the appropriate content for them”; furthermore, readers “tend to place the ultimate blame on the editors for abuses of advertiser influence” (Haley and Cunningham 2003, 187). This is to say that readers consider it the job of the editor to resist pressure, not the advertisers to back off.

While this information pertains to American newspapers and magazines, it does provide an example of the type of pressure tactics advertisers use and the difficulty some editors have in resisting them. It also serves as an example of the level of interference that may try and cross the border into Canadian journalism.

However, by looking at statistical evidence and conducting several interviews with working reporters and members of media organizations, such as the Canadian Association of Journalists president Mary Agnes Welch, this thesis was able to determine that in Canada, advertising pressure is not the driving force behind the production of promotional news stories. This was an important discovery as it dispels the myth that advertisers exert control over journalists. Once this was established, the main argument that promotional journalism is largely a result of the three factors presented in Chapter 3 was strengthened. These three ingredients (public relations firms and press releases, the acceptance of advertorial-style news, and dwindling financial resources for newsrooms), when further combined with reporters' explanations of writing stories for convenience and as a reader service, provide an explanation for the occurrence of promotional journalism.

Furthermore, looking at the situation in the United States is important to not only see how it differs, but to ponder what promotional journalism could evolve into. In the United States many newspaper editors and reporters have indicated that they sometimes feeling pressure from advertisers to write favourable stories, or at the very least, omit negative information that would portray a company, product or event in a poor light. The situation at American magazines is far worse, with editors saying outright they include promotional material at the insistence of advertisers on a routine basis. These points are important reminders about why it is important to remain vigilant against this type of pressure. If complacency is already one explanation given for the rise of promotional journalism in Canada, who is to say it can't evolve into outright apathy.

The following chapter will examine first the value of a well-done news story. Then it will look at the idea of traditional journalism in today's newspaper climate and what role, if any, promotional journalism plays in prompting or facilitating the change. Lastly, in response to a shift in the delivery of news, it will look at the adjustments newspapers are making in order to adapt to a new climate. The *Globe and Mail* will be used as an example for this point, as it redesigned its newspaper in an attempt to address the speed in which readers access news today, while returning to the

roots of journalism in the hard copy version (Greenspon 2007).

Chapter 5

The value of a well-done news story

The news business is going through rapid and challenging change (Edward Greenspon 2008).

British newspaper magnate and author Cecil King wrote in his 1967 book, *The Future of the Press*, that merely receiving information is not the same as being informed on the “serious issues” that newspapers are relied on to provide readers with context and a broader understanding (King 1967, 64). Yet, King, who was chairman of the International Publishing Corp., then the biggest publishing empire in the world, felt that newspapers were already flirting with the idea that “‘knowingness’ may be substituted for knowledge” (King 1967, 64). The reality is, however, that stories which allow for “knowingness,” rather than knowledge, not only deprive readers of information and public discourse, but are also “weakening the foundation of democracy by diminishing the public’s information about public affairs and its interest in politics” (Patterson 2001). A premise of this thesis is stories that are promotional in nature fall into the category of imparting “knowingness” on readers, but not knowledge about a topic or issue.

This chapter will explore the value of a well-done news story, one that delivers knowledge, rather than simple “knowingness.” When a news story is done properly, it should provoke dialogue and provide a platform for further discussion. Readers should be given alternative points of view from a variety of sources, as well as the background and history of the topic at hand, allowing them to formulate informed and measured opinions about current affairs. News stories drafted in this context engage the community rather than pacify it.

A news story’s value

Readers rely on reporters to make informed choices for them. They have been conditioned to accept that reporters are gathering facts in the spirit of independence and are presenting journalistic news stories rather than regular,

unvetted information (Steele 2008). Independence requires reporters to ask questions about the quality of the information they are ferreting out and about the quality and reliability of their sources. “The job of the journalist is to gather information that is truthful, meaningful and fully independent; to seek and report the truth, to be fair, to be an independent broker of information, and not be unduly influenced” (Steele 2008). When these criteria are fulfilled, the information is considered to have value and to be credible, and it then provides the foundation for a news story that is well done. “It is always a challenge to focus on substance and meaningful journalism and not let ancillary stories or entertainment or non-important stories encroach on the more important, traditional news stories — there is a place for those stories, but how much space should they be given and where should they run?” (Steele 2008). While reporters may not be influenced by advertisers to write favourable stories, reporting directly from press releases suggests the information is not being checked for quality, truthfulness and reliability. According to Steele (2008), protecting journalistic values should be the number one priority of newspaper reporters and editors. When news stories are well done, readers are then connected to “their newspapers, their communities and the political process” (Shepard 1994, 29). Furthermore, “high-quality journalism — accurate, clear and in-depth — strongly correlates with, if it doesn’t create, market success” (Farhi 2005, 59).

Ethics expert Steele (2008) says failing to maintain the standards of solid journalism eventually leads to a loss of credibility for the newspaper, a lowering of expectations on both sides and the creation of an apathetic readership. When the standards are lowered, stories of a promotional nature can be one of the byproducts. “It [promotional journalism] is not rampant, but it’s there. That’s why you always have to protect journalistic values. What about viewers and readers, are they getting the full picture? The full story?” (Steele 2008).

Promotional journalism has been called “lazy” (Wycliff 2007 and Steele 2008), a story format reporters use, sometimes subconsciously, when they are over-worked and struggling to keep up with deadlines, as CAJ president Welch (2008) said earlier in this paper. It is also considered a failure to see the advertising

message in information presented in press releases (Wycliff 2007 and Steele 2008). Further, its stories are characterized as often containing only a single source and little, if any background information. There is little journalistic value in a promotional news story, they rarely create a discourse and they rarely engage the community, because they rarely offer readers the contextual information necessary to allow this to happen.

Yet, there will be those who argue that the information in a promotional news story has value, albeit a different type of value. Certainly, determining the value of a news story is arbitrary and varying degrees of the said value exist, but each story must meet the basic requirements of a journalistic news story to even be considered. If, “at its most basic, journalism consists of two questions: What’s happening out there and what does it mean?” (Greenspon 2007), then all journalistic news stories should be able to provide the answers and would therefore be considered to have value.

By revisiting several promotional stories already presented in this thesis, however, it becomes evident that not all news stories answer these two basic questions. At best, many promotional stories answer the first question of, “What’s happening out there?” Take, for example, the Tim Hortons rimroller story (Lackner 2007). It does answer Greenspon’s first question — someone has invented a tool to roll up coffee cup rims. To a certain extent it also answers Greenspon’s second question — it means people will no longer get “broken fingernails” or “wax in the teeth” when rolling up a Tim Hortons coffee cup rim. But do those superficial facts really answer the second question in any meaningful way? This thesis submits the answer is no. While the story is pop-culture in nature, it doesn’t provide readers with any context whatsoever. It could still be a light-hearted story and provide facts such as how many contest coffee cups are sold each year, how many prizes are won, and how Tim Hortons has evolved to become a piece of Canadiana. At the very least, it could have included some comment from someone at the Tim Hortons coffee company. Yet, without these additions, it was still placed as the lead story on the front page of the *Ottawa Citizen*. Certainly, it is a “talker” story and a “quick hit”

(Welch 2007), but by definition, it is not a well-done news story and therefore does not hold a lot of value.

Similarly, the *National Post* story, "Corporate gift giving goes extreme" (Harris 2005), is also devoid of context and depth, providing readers with only a healthy listing of services offered by the company Great Experiences. This story answers the question of, "What is happening?" but it doesn't answer the question of, "What does it mean?" There is little, if anything, in the story that answers that question when asked in a journalistic frame. As presented, there is nothing beyond the fact that readers can purchase vacation packages. Again, it could have provided readers with context by answering questions such as: do employees work harder if incentives are available, how many companies participate in such programs and is it a growing trend? This not an example of a well-done news story and therefore, like the previous example, does not hold any value.

As presented, neither of these stories imparts knowledge, but merely "knowingness." The same can be said for the more than 100 stories collected for this thesis. Promotional stories do not have any substance, they are not meaningful and have little journalistic value. If the value of a well-done news story is paramount to the success of a newspaper (Farhi 2005), then these stories, and others like them, are doing a disservice not only to the newspaper, but to readers as well (Wycliff 2007).

The Globe and Mail, 2007

In the spring of 2007, the *Globe and Mail* began a renaissance movement of sorts when it launched a redesigned and refocused version of its newspaper. Canada's well-respected daily was investing aggressively in continued growth, hiring an almost unprecedented 30 new staff members to work on the print version of its product, they were introducing a new lifestyle section and a new business website. The idea, said editor-in-chief Edward Greenspon (2007), was to return to the roots of traditional journalism, while simultaneously leading the industry into the future. (While the newsroom landscape is decidedly different now than it was in April 2007 (the *Globe and Mail* announced in January 2009 it was trimming 10 per cent of its

workforce) this example is still worthy of examination as it will ultimately show a decrease in the appearance promotional stories during the one-year period following the unveiling of the revamped paper.)

In a sense, Greenspon's 2007 announcement to re-work the newspaper was an acknowledgement that news and the presentation of it was beginning to stray from the traditional framework of journalism. There was a disconnect between the frequently updated news stories on the newspaper's website and the news that was appearing in the next day's newspaper (Greenspon 2007). The web version was, in effect, cancelling out the paper version and the *Globe and Mail* was essentially competing with itself for readers, a problem faced by many papers across the country. By filing and updating stories on the website as they broke, and then essentially filing that same final version of the story for the next day's paper, the *Globe and Mail* was making many of the print edition stories irrelevant.

Enter the renaissance. In April 2007, the *Globe and Mail* presented a "redesigned newspaper, marrying the long-standing authority of the *Globe and Mail* to a more colourful, vibrant, energetic presentation. But underlying this [was] an effort to present a smarter and more accessible newspaper and Web package" (Greenspon 2007). The end result would mean that the newspaper would be "anchored to the news" (Greenspon 2007). Failure to make this shift towards "generating both original stories . . . and explanation . . . would mean [the *Globe and Mail*] would risk drifting into irrelevance" (Greenspon 2007).

The move was founded on a recommitment to "investigation, interpretation and insight, rededicating [itself] to ferreting out matters of relevance that would otherwise remain hidden and situating these matters in their larger context" (Greenspon 2007). Beyond that, the paper is going back to the basics of journalism by answering "the who, what, when and where" of stories, "grounding [the *Globe and Mail's*] strong writing in equally strong reporting" (Greenspon 2007). The word choice Greenspon uses to make the paper's intentions clear, that they are "rededicating" and "shifting" focus back to news gathering and reporting, suggests the paper, at some point, drifted from those primary tenets of journalism.

“At its most basic, journalism consists of two questions: “What’s happening out there and what does it mean? In a digital age, the former is often best communicated through the swift delivery systems of Internet sites . . . Newspapers remain anchored to the news — otherwise, they would risk drifting into irrelevance — but their emphasis must shift toward generating both original stories (through quality of reporting, writing and visual presentation) and explanation (the whys and hows behind news developments)” (Greenspon 2007).

The re-structuring of 2007 flies in the face of what was and still is happening elsewhere in the newspaper business, yet the *Globe and Mail*, arguably the country’s leading national newspaper, both in circulation numbers and advertising revenue (NAD Bank 2007), was working to advance itself, recognizing the need to return to the practice of basic journalism. Re-investing in the product is viewed as the best way to ensure the future success of the newspaper — “Put more money back into the newsroom and build up the journalistic firepower — and the community credibility — that many newspapers have been frittering away for years” (Farhi 2005, 59). Given that the economic climate has changed significantly since the *Globe and Mail* publicly declared its recommitment to journalism — word is management avoided “gutting” the newsroom, but a combination of layoffs and buyouts did take place — this example is of even greater interest for this study. It now serves as a type of measuring stick that can show the value, or lack thereof, of investing in the newsroom. Furthermore, it allows for observation and future study of what happens when that investment is slowed or stopped.

Framing these circumstances, both the recommitment to journalism and the subsequent economic slowdown, within the context of promotional journalism is perhaps not obvious at first glance, but consider this: If the *Globe and Mail* made the commitment to practice a more traditional form of journalism, and hired the staff to allow this to occur, then it is conceivable that promotional journalism will be reduced if not eliminated from the traditional news sections, in this case the A-section of this particular newspaper. As this thesis has shown, promotional news stories are neither investigative, interpretative nor insightful, rather, they are the opposite.

In order to determine if this recommitment to journalism reduced promotional stories from the news pages of the *Globe and Mail*, data was collected for a one year-period from April 2007 to April 2008 using the electronic search engine Factiva. During that period, two promotional articles were identified. Compare that to the 19 *Globe and Mail* articles collected for their level of promotional content during the original data collection period from 2004 to 2007. Broken down, the original data set showed approximately six promotional articles appearing in the A-section of the *Globe and Mail* for each year of the three-year study. The result was a two-thirds reduction of promotional stories on those same pages during the first year of the relaunch of the newspaper in April 2007.

By essentially countering two of the three factors that have been determined to contribute to the production of promotional news — those being reliance on the press release and dwindling newsroom resources — the *Globe and Mail* eliminated almost all of the promotional stories that were appearing on its A-section pages. It therefore stands to reason that by raising the bar within its own organization, the *Globe and Mail* could also set a higher standard within the industry, a supposition based on the argument set out earlier in this thesis that this newspaper is considered to be among the most trustworthy, credible and influential papers in the country, meaning it all but sets the agenda for news coverage. If anything, a revamped, high-quality product should result in market success (Farhi 2005), making it a business model to be copied. The redesign of the paper and its renewed commitment to high-quality journalism demonstrates that newspapers continue to find value in well-done news stories, ones that impart knowledge rather than mere “knowingness.”

One of the results of the *Globe and Mail's* recommitment to journalism was a decrease in promotional news stories. It will be interesting to observe if the current cutbacks, both in staff and resources, reverses this trend. However, for the purpose of this study, it is too soon to tell.

Conclusion

It [promotional journalism] is not rampant, but it's there. That's why you always have to protect journalistic values. What about viewers and readers, are they getting the full picture? The full story? (Steele 2008).

Since the first newspaper in Canada, the *Halifax Gazette*, was launched in 1752, tremendous changes in technology, the economy and in what reader's want from a newspaper have shaped the industry into what it is today. It was, and still is, necessary for editors and reporters to adapt with the times in order to stay relevant, yet, at its very core, news journalism has remained the constant amidst the many transformations.

At times, however, its foundation has been challenged, and today that continues to be the case. If, at its most basic, the role of journalism is to impart knowledge and inform readers about topics and issues of both a public and private nature, then the presence of promotional news stories is an affront to this premise. Certainly, concessions have been made to allow for a certain amount of promotional journalism to exist within the pages of newspapers, largely in formats such as advertiser-paid advertorials, speciality sections produced by reporters in departments separate from the main newsroom, and in the wide range of lifestyle sections written today by news reporters. When permitted within these strict parameters, promotional journalism is seemingly tolerated. It is neither rejected nor considered to be false or misleading, but rather, it is regarded as a type of "reader service."

Unlike paid advertorials and speciality sections, which were solutions to getting around overt and flagrant attempts to present advertising copy as news while still allowing both formats to disguise themselves as news copy, promotional journalism is permitted on the news pages. The post-war 1950s marked the early beginnings of this change as the time period brought with it the growth of mass of consumption. Suddenly, people had access to disposable income, they were exposed to advertising on a much-broader scale and consequently, they were in

want of more products and a more affluent lifestyle. As the Canadian consumer culture continued to grow, promotional journalism grew with it and promotional stories eventually began to appear with regularity in lifestyle sections.

Today, lifestyle reporters who use the story format justify its presence by calling it a “reader service” that is not written for the “regular news pages.” Product names, prices and features are written into stories for convenience, both for the reporters and readers. Promotional journalism in this context is a reflection of the growing emphasis of not only consumer-oriented reporting, but also on news that is framed in individualized terms, providing individuals with information about products or services they need for personal use. It conforms to the logic of consumerism and positions readers as individuals who relate to public life according to the exchange logic of the market. This, in and of itself, is a deviation from the fundamental role of journalism, which is to help people understand and define their communities and to create a common language and common knowledge rooted in reality. A news story should impart knowledge, rather than mere “knowingness” and be an effective tool to educate and effect social reform.

As promotional stories began to appear more frequently, readers became accustomed to seeing them and reading them, thus growing somewhat complacent at their appearance and eventually considering promotional stories to be a requisite part of lifestyle sections. This reader-writer complacency towards promotional stories, combined with a growing consumer-driven culture, has led to promotional journalism not only appearing in lifestyle sections, but to it being the thrust of those sections in newspapers across the country.

Eventually, promotional journalism made its way onto the “regular news pages,” those typically being in the A-section and City section of newspapers. The data collected and tested for this thesis indicates that promotional stories are indeed appearing on the news pages, challenging traditional definitions of what constitutes useful or appropriate knowledge about public, and to a certain degree, private affairs. This realization is disconcerting because it indicates a shift to a less rigorous reporting process. It also signals a change further up the newspaper chain of

command, where editors and managers consider the production and appearance of promotional stories to be acceptable on the news pages.

In order to prove this was indeed happening, original data (promotional news stories) was collected on a daily basis from Canadian metropolitan dailies for a consecutive three-year period from September 2004 to September 2007. Some 106 stories were compiled, all of which had a promotional “feel” and contained names of products, prices, store locations, selling features or how-to purchase information. Each article was tested against a series of questions to establish the tone and proportion of the promotional elements and to determine if those outweighed its journalistic purpose. The test questions considered a story’s news value, public benefit, commercial aspect and use of sources. The vast majority of the articles collected and tested were deemed to be promotional in nature.

The stories were then further analyzed by looking for consumer-benefit-added-value — is there a consumer benefit to the promotional material and what is the journalistic value of that information. Consumer reporting, to some degree, is reasonable, but there is a fine line between reporting on a product, for example, and “selling” it.

With the data showing that promotional stories had moved from the pages of lifestyle sections to the more traditional news pages of newspapers, many critics said it was, in part, a result of laziness by reporters and editors, a move towards being less thorough with the reporting process. A signal that reporters aren’t examining the quality of the information contained in, for example, press releases, to check if it is truthful and credible. In Canada, promotional journalism is not thought to be a result of any covert attempts by advertisers and reporters to present advertising as news.

Stories that provide readers with product prices and store locations not only do a disservice to the reader, but erode the quality and standards of journalism overall. They threaten all editorial content by association and deprive readers of critically informative, unbiased, issue-based journalism. Promotional stories focus on the features of new products, where they can be purchased and how much they

cost, but they do not provide context or depth, they do not tell readers why the stories matter or what they mean.

While critics call the writing of promotional stories “lazy,” it is also a combination of several other factors coming together that leads to the production of such stories. In this thesis, the role of the public relations practitioner was examined, along with that of the press releases they issue. As well, reader/writer complacency with advertorial-style news stories and dwindling newsroom resources were also studied.

Public relations firms today are very savvy; they not only capitalize on news events to benefit themselves, much like the Air France plane crash example, but they also work to create and direct news stories through the creative use of press releases. A well-written press release usually answers the basic questions of who, what, where, when and why and includes ready-made quotations. This saves reporters time, allowing them to write stories directly from the press release, as was shown through the *Calgary Herald* story about HBC securing the contract to design and sell the Olympic clothing line over Roots. In the story, the reporter quotes directly from the press release, attributing the quotes as such, among other details. The story not only fails readers as it does not provide any context or even fact checking, but it also does a disservice to the newspaper. When reporters do not go beyond the information presented in a press release, they are essentially telling readers that all important news is at or near the surface. Thus defying logic and failing readers and the practice of journalism.

The routine presence of stories based on information from ready-to-use-press releases creates a level of acceptance among readers, and to a certain extent among reporters and editors. The more frequently promotional stories appear, the more all sides become accustomed to seeing them, creating a type of complacency and a “new norm.”

These two factors, press release reporting and a level of acceptance of that style, lead to the third point, that being the effects of dwindling newsroom resources and hard economic times. Current financial times have now left newspapers in an

interesting predicament. For several years it has been widely acknowledged that newsrooms are functioning with fewer and fewer staff. Combine that with the world economic crisis that has in the last year led to hundreds of layoffs at newspapers across the country and suddenly editors are once again asking the few to do the work of the many. The result is reporters seeking out quantity over quality, meaning the shorter, easier and lighter the story, the faster it can be written and the sooner the reporter can move onto the next piece. Those are the stories, however, that tend to be largely promotional in nature, that are reported directly from a press release, that are presented unchallenged, without outside sources, without context or depth.

These three factors provide the framework for explaining that promotional journalism occurs. It is now up to the industry to choose to either recommit and rededicate itself to producing investigative, interpretative and insightful journalism or not. If it decides to continue on its present course, it may become a contributing factor in the emergence of what is being called a “post-journalism era.”

Certainly, the reputation of a newspaper is neither won nor lost on a single story, but rather slowly eroded over time. With stories such as the *Ottawa Citizen's* Tim Hortons rimroller invention making a splash on the front page, but failing to provide readers with any context beyond a product being for sale, one must consider it to be a story that contributes to the slow, overall erosion of news credibility. Some critics attributed the decision to publish the rimroller story on the front page to it being “news-you-can-use” or a “talker” story. What is not taken into account, however, is the cumulative affect such stories have on readers. If the production of promotional stories can be attributed to, in part, a “lazy” news staff, then it stands to reason that the stories will create lazy readers, ones who are indifferent to the quality of news presented to them.

While it is difficult to conclude one way or another if we are entering a “post-journalism era” (Altheide and Snow 1991) or a “post-newspaper society” (Engel 2003), it is hard to argue against the viewpoint that promotional journalism should not be a catalyst for such a shift. Some newspapers, such as the *Globe and Mail*, have taken a stance and recommitted themselves to practicing good journalism. They are

executing an updated blueprint for news coverage today that incorporates both the rapid changes occurring within the industry, while maintaining the standards on which it was built.

The industry needs to contemplate the question of: "How will we guard against newspapers' spirit: their gift for knitting together disparate threads of a community rather than pandering to divergent demographics, ages and interests; their commitment to watchdog journalism and to holding the powerful accountable; their lofty standards of dogged fact-finding and tireless digging?" (Smolkin 2006, 23).

A possible solution can be found in Europe. In several countries, legislation exists that prohibits the blending of advertising and editorial content or what they call "product publicity." In Germany, "the mention or presentation of products, services, names, brand names or activities of a manufacturer service-provider which are unnecessary from a journalistic or artistic point of view are to be regarded as surreptitious advertising. And surreptitious advertising is prohibited," according to the National Agreement on Broadcasting by the German Federal States (Public Broadcasting Agreement) of January 2001. This is one of many statutes in a series of laws and guidelines that enforce the separation of advertising and program content, making it more than simply a question of ethics (Baerns 2003, 102). Granted, this law applies to a broadcast journalism agreement (no such "law" exists within the Canadian Broadcast Act) and is not structured around newspapers, it does seem quite possible that the concept could transcend media.

Referred to in Germany as the "separation principle," the courts ultimately rule if there is a legitimate breach once a violation is filed. For example, in 2007, a German court ruled that a local radio broadcaster breached the "separation principle" when it aired a story with the owner of a local meat company because it "amounted to surreptitious advertising" (Kammergericht 2007). The court decided that:

the law had been broken on the grounds that consumers regularly attached greater importance to editorial content than to advertising that was clearly identifiable as such. It was true that editorial reports on companies could have a certain advertising effect.

In this case, however, the repeated references to the company name, the reporter's complimentary remarks and concluding recommendation constituted more than factual information and amounted to unequivocal praise of the company concerned. Alongside the highly suggestive nature of the journalistic report, the court held that competition rules had been breached because other companies might be led to expect similar treatment (Kammergericht 2007).

According to German law, "product publicity" seeks to persuade editors to mention and endorse companies, as well as advertise and describe their products and services, completely independent of advertising and payments (Moss, Dejan, Warnaby 2000). Breaches of the "separation principle" are not considered oversights, but rather an indication of the "increasing mutual permeation of economic and societal process, particularly in the leisure activities of people" (Moss, Dejan, Warnaby 2000, 247). According to Baerns, it is a plausible assumption that advertisements receive greater attention when disguised as editorial content. She acknowledges her assumption does not, however, stand the test of empirical validation. Nevertheless, editorial advertising (promotional stories) and product placement have now seemingly become acceptable and the precept of separating advertising and editorial content is increasingly being breached, not only in radio and television. In newspapers and magazines, too, the grey area between editorial text and advertising is spreading (Baerns 2003).

Introducing a similar practice into Canadian newspaper journalism is an idea worth considering. If businesses in Canada felt other businesses were getting free advertising via news stories, thus giving one an unfair advantage over the other, and such legislation was in place, they could file a complaint. Conversely, if other journalists felt newspapers were running too many promotional stories, compromising the integrity of the industry, they could file a complaint. This type of process could serve as a kind of control, allowing the industry to self-regulate against

promotional journalism.

The question of whether or not legislation could work remains unanswered. It could be argued that passing legislation in Canada would prove difficult as freedom of the press is a fundamental right included in section 2(b) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, thus preventing interference with the workings of the press. However, according to Baerns (2003), legislating against the intrusion of promotional material “helps to uphold the autonomy and credibility of the media” and benefits “all communication professions concerned — publishers, broadcasting stations, advertising public relations, journalism — and ultimately to every citizen who participates in mass media communication” (Baerns 104). Considering the defining characteristics of promotional news are the use of product names, the presentation of prices, how-to purchase information and store locations, it stands to reason running promotional news stories in Germany, as it is done in Canada, would be illegal. Consideration to something akin to the “separation principle” should be given as it could protect the journalistic values and credibility of newspapers into the future.

However, if legislation is ultimately ruled out, because of restrictions within the Charter, then what is the answer? As it stands today, Canadian journalists use their individual news values and judgement to self-regulate against the production of promotional news. But is that enough? Clearly it is not as promotional news stories blatantly appear on traditional news pages, as this thesis has shown. If the story format continues to make inroads into the traditional news sections, increasingly displacing informative content about public and private affairs that readers expect from newspapers, there will be a price to pay in the future for newspapers.

The role of the A-section and City section of newspapers is to impart knowledge on the readers, providing them with information necessary to make intelligent decisions and draw independent conclusions about current affairs. As promotional journalism encroaches on the sanctity of those sections, it stands to reason there will be consequences for the newspaper and its reputation as being a purveyor of stories that are unbiased, credible, trusted and needed for making informed public decisions.

Because there is so little research done on this topic specifically in North America, a beginning might be to address the format and its intrusion into the traditional news sections. This thesis is a start in creating an awareness of a key hallmark of promotional journalism, its ability to seamlessly move from section to section within the paper, ultimately becoming an acceptable and legitimized story format. Very few, if any, studies on this topic exist. Bringing the phenomenon to the public's attention, especially that of editors and reporters, should give the industry pause for thought, perhaps even making some immediately more conscientious.

The 2007 relaunch of the *Globe and Mail* is a perfect example to watch and study. The circumstances of the paper reinvesting in the newsroom, followed by the subsequent market decline and newsroom layoffs and cutbacks affords exceptional conditions worthwhile of further research in terms of promotional journalism.

Future study should also include a broader search of newspapers for a longer period of time — two factors that would help determine if promotional news stories, as they appear in the A-section and City section, are in effect an occurring upward trend — as this study is but a first step.

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Interviews

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Appendix A

A chronological catalogue of the promotional news stories collected and divided by monthly quarters

Q1 = September, October, November 2004

October 2004

Oct. 1, 2005. Spears, Tom. "Need a lift? Just dial # TAXI on your cellphone," *Ottawa Citizen*, pp. B1.

Q2 = December 2004, January, February 2005

January 2005

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Q8= June, July, August 2006

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