

COVERT ADVERTISING IN THE CONTEXT OF MEDIAETHICS ON THE EXAMPLE OF SLOVENIAN PRESS

Rishi Mohan

Research Scholar Department of Management, Manav Bharti University, Solan, H.P.

ABSTRACT

Advertising has become an indispensable part of modern information society, which allows companies that sell, the media source of funds, and consumers a quality choice between different products and services. Advertisers have at their disposal a lot of features, tools, techniques and ways to try to attract potential customers. Due to the increasing competition in the market often choose new, legally and ethically inadmissible methods of advertising which is to attract attention and increase sales, one of these ways is covert advertising.

We consider advertising to be covert when the ordered and paid content, which should be performed like an announcement, is shown like an editorial content of the defined media. Such contributions are completely unobjective and unethical since they are not marked as advertising messages. They are shown like independent journalistic contributions and the public believes them therefore they are typical examples of leading public astray. With the publishing of hybrid messages the credibility of the media is being lost. Longitudinally, more credibility will be on the side of that media, which will not indulge on the pressure of

INTRODUCTION

Covert advertising is not a new phenomenon in mass media. For example, in 1883 Benjamin Day lowered the price for his newspaper New York Sun and it cost 1 penny then. In that way he changed the relationship between a publisher and a journalist and advertisers and readers (Patterson and Wilkins, 1994, p. 169). Newspapers could no longer live on means coming from pre-pays. So advertisers became only those who bought advertising space which brought them profit and therefore their own economical existence was provided for. Having newspapers was tempting for advertisers and public became a mean to get money from the advertisers. It was then, for the first time, that ads got place in journalistic contributions.

Covert advertising is not limited with print media and individuals can face with covert advertisements while they are watching TV, listening to the radio, reading a magazine or newspaper and even while they are searching on Internet.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: DEFINING COVERT ADVERTISING

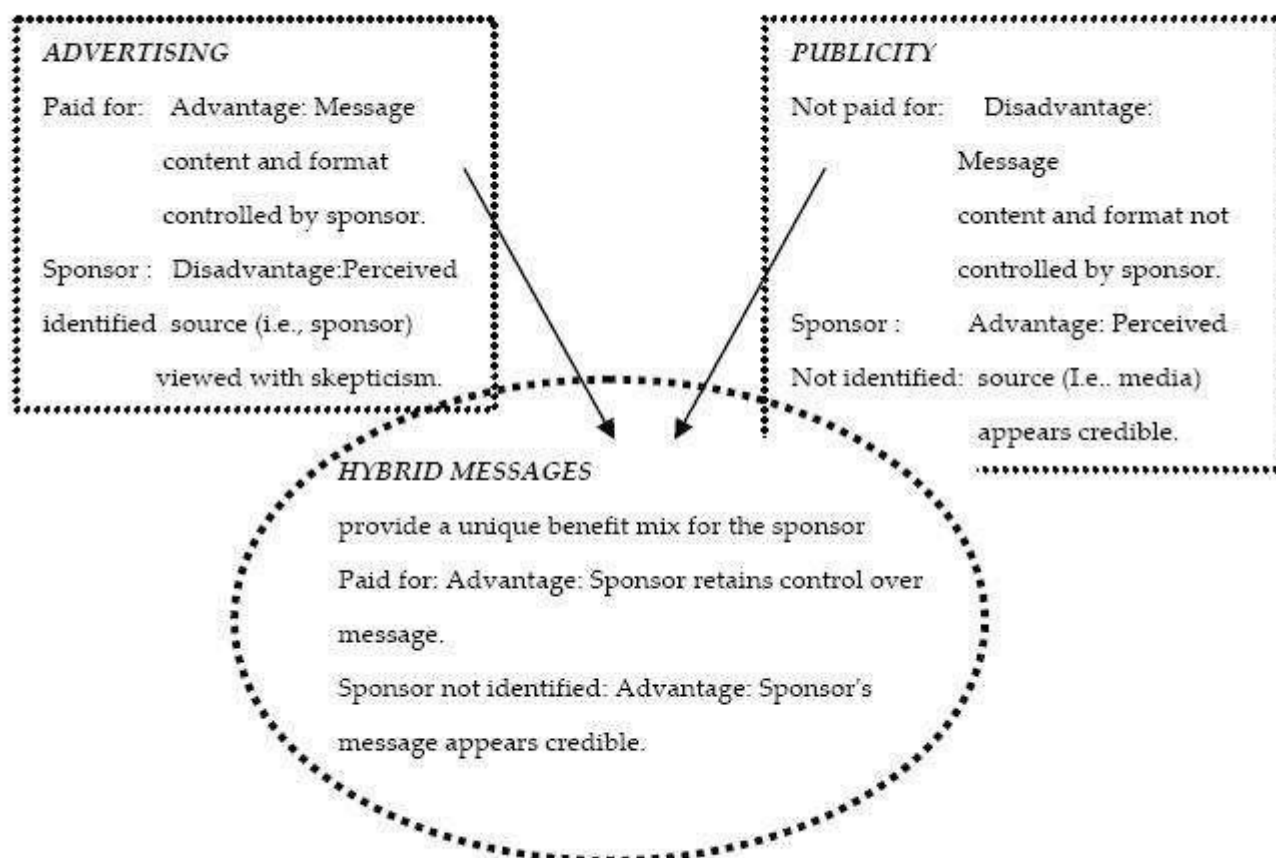
There are many different authors who suggest different definitions of covert advertising. In the continuation, we are going to overrule some definitions and then we are going to show different forms and categories of covert advertising. When categorizing covert ads there is a doubt when a covert ad can be defined as such, unless it is clear that an ad is paid by an advertiser. The point of covert advertising is that audiences do not know whether an ad is paid or not. So if a covert ad is not directly paid, there surely exists close co-operation between advertisers and an owner of the media. This can be in a form of exchanging gifts, offering extra services etc.

Categorization, according to which articles are defined and sorted out, is shown in the section of the empirical research.

Podnar and Golub (2001, p. 56) enumerate four types of covert advertising:

- An article paid by a profitable organization with intention to present its products or services as to improve its reputation;
- An article written on a certain theme with intention to draw attention to products of advertisers mentioned;
- A journalistic contribution sent by the people working in public relations and showing unchanged messages for media;
- An article based on a message for media, but containing only that information which are good for a certain company because otherwise this company would withdraw its ordered ads from this media (obligation). Advertising refers to communications that are paid for, and which clearly identify the message sponsor, while publicity represents messages that are not paid for, and which do not identify the sponsor. story on a branded product. Hybrid messages include all paid attempts to influence audiences for commercial benefit using communications that project a noncommercial character; under these circumstances, audiences are likely to be unaware of the commercial influence attempt and/or to process the content of such communications differently than they process commercial messages.

Figure 1: Hybrid Messages Creatively Combine Advertising and Publicity Concepts



Source: S. Balasubramanian (1994, p. 30).

When we talk about types of hybrid messages, a distinction for expositional ease, is made between established and emergent hybrid messages. The former group has more notoriety, because it includes hybrid types that have a long history, and attracted some regulatory attention in the past. The latter category subsumes hybrid types with a more recent origin and, therefore, has not been subject to much regulatory attention. The most important established hybrid type is product placement¹ (ibidem).

We are the most common with the defining covert advertising according to Zajc and Zavrl (1998, pp. 652-658): covert ads are those which are actually ads but they are marked as journalistic contributions and media audience cannot recognize them as ads. We talk about ads which are in opposition to the existing law code of the Republic of Slovenia, to the opposition of code which deals with the public relationship and are not in accordance to the independent rules of the advertising and journalistic code. They oppose the law code when they are not presented as ads although they actually are. Covert ads are one of the thorniest problems in the media market. Frequency of this violation is also problematic because it misleads a consumer who believes that he reads independent, journalistic information which is actually advertising.

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH- CASE STUDY

Purpose and objectives

The purpose of our article is to define, analyze and explore covert advertising in the Slovenian press. We arise from the research question: Do the covert advertising appears in the most important Slovenian print journals and how often?

The goal is, through theoretical knowledge of foreign and domestic literature to do the research on covert advertising in Slovenian press, with content analysis and mutual comparison of three most important Slovenian print journals: Delo, Dnevnik and Večer. Our next goal is, with the method of comparing the different findings, and the method of synthesis based on the findings, obtained in the context of theoretical and empirical work, to reach certain conclusions, to establish a basis of conclusions for reducing covert advertising in the praxis, and to display the open problems for further research.

Limitations of research

This article contains the following limitations:

- The first limitation is presenting a lack of literature in this area, especially very poor knowledge of covert advertising in English, American and German literature.
- There is not a single word that around the world marked the same phenomenon.
- This research is limited to print media, into consideration come only the texts of covert advertising in the press.
- This is a survey of ads where we cannot rule out subjective assessments.

Research methods and empirical data

Our aim is to define, analyse and with the help of empirical analysis research into covert advertising in Slovene print media. We are going to have the look at three Slovene daily newspapers and we are going to compare them. They are: Večer, Delo and Dnevnik with their supplementary issues. All three newspapers were analysed between 3.1.2008 and 9.1.2008, which means six days because newspapers are not published on Sundays in Slovenia. An exception is Nedelo but we could not analyse it because there is no newspaper

to be compared with. We decided for those Covert Advertising in the Context of Media Ethics on the Example of Slovenian Press newspapers because their rates of readers are highest. An exception is Slovenske novice but they are classified as typical tabloid³. On the basis of the facts we got when doing theoretical and empirical work by using method of comparison and method of synthesis, we tried to come to certain conclusions and to form key facts on these conclusions. We also tried to find suggestions how to minimize covert advertising in practice and present open problems for the next survey. In the first part we used descriptive approach, because we described facts and phenomena. We used foreign and Slovene literature, articles, Internet sources etc. and method of compilation because we summarized points of view, results of other authors and conclusions. In the practical part we used content analysis as a scientific method to research texts of covert advertising in three Slovene print journals; we used analytical approach. Data were analysed with the help of the computer programme SPSS (originally, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) used for statistical analysis.

DAILY NEWSPAPERS	PERCENTAGE OF READING ONE ISSUE
DELO	10,5
DIREKT	3,7
DNEVNIK	8,8
EKIPA	2,5
FINANCE	3,7
PRIMORSKE NOVICE	4,1
SLOVENSKE NOVICE	21,1
VEČER	9,0

Source: National survey of reading, 2008. Presenting for the year 2007.

Categorization of covert advertising

We see that different authors use different definitions and different criteria to define covert advertising. When categorizing covert ads there is a doubt when a covert ad can be defined as such if one cannot tell that it is paid by an advertiser. The point of covert advertising is that it is not clear to media audience that it is a paid ad.

According to our research we have classified among advertising:

- Positive remarks of a selected product (company, service) and its praise;
- An article which is next to an ad and is thematically related to an ad;
- Messages for public which promote a certain product (company, service) and are published in a form of a journalist's article but it is not stated that it is about publicity;
- So-called editorial ads or columns next to photos (which are at first sight all right and a producer is not clear) mention a company (producer, prices) of presented products;

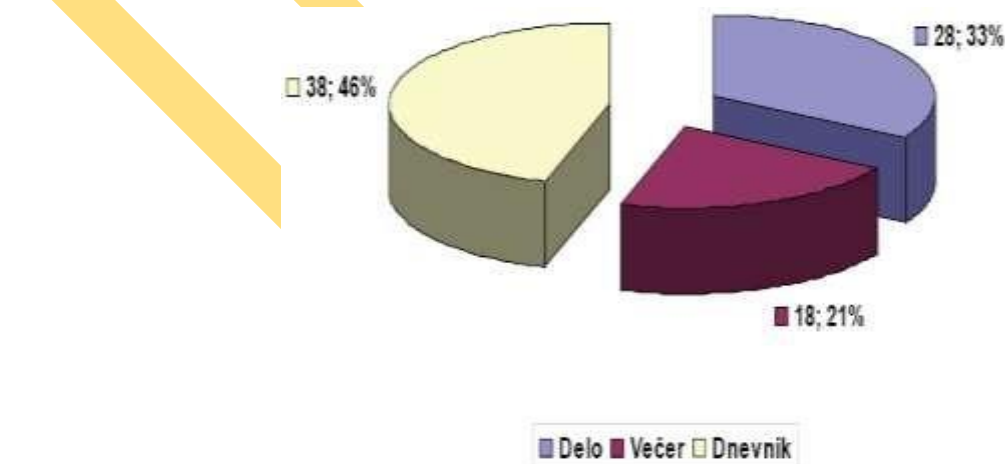
- Unnecessarily published photos next to articles in which a chosen product is clearly seen (company, service). We have tried to indicate whether an article is a covert ad on the basis of the following characteristics – (at least one of the following had to be in an article):
- A piece of information put in a text with a business purpose. The aim of this information is to form and hold interest for a legal or natural person and to help selling a product, service;
- Information meant for a certain group of people;
- Artificial character of news found in the text; information has no real basis;
- Emotionally expressed, positively assessed argumentation in order to favorize a product in a commercial; commercial is expressed in exaggerated, not proper and non-artificial enthusiasm yet the product or service is nothing special;
- Positioning a product for a sale, giving it different characteristics;
- Orientations for a speed sell of a product (looking for services). Texts in this category contain information usually related to a certain time product (Jurišić et al., 2007, pp. 13-14). We have not classified among covert advertising: Editorial contents marked with for example PR message, promotional material, advertising message, promotional message..., where a sign is clearly seen and is not coloured or covered with something else.

Interpretation of Results

Data of research were processed with the computer programme SPSS (statistics: $N=84$, $\alpha=0,05$ $p<0,0005$, $p<\alpha$) and we came to next conclusions:

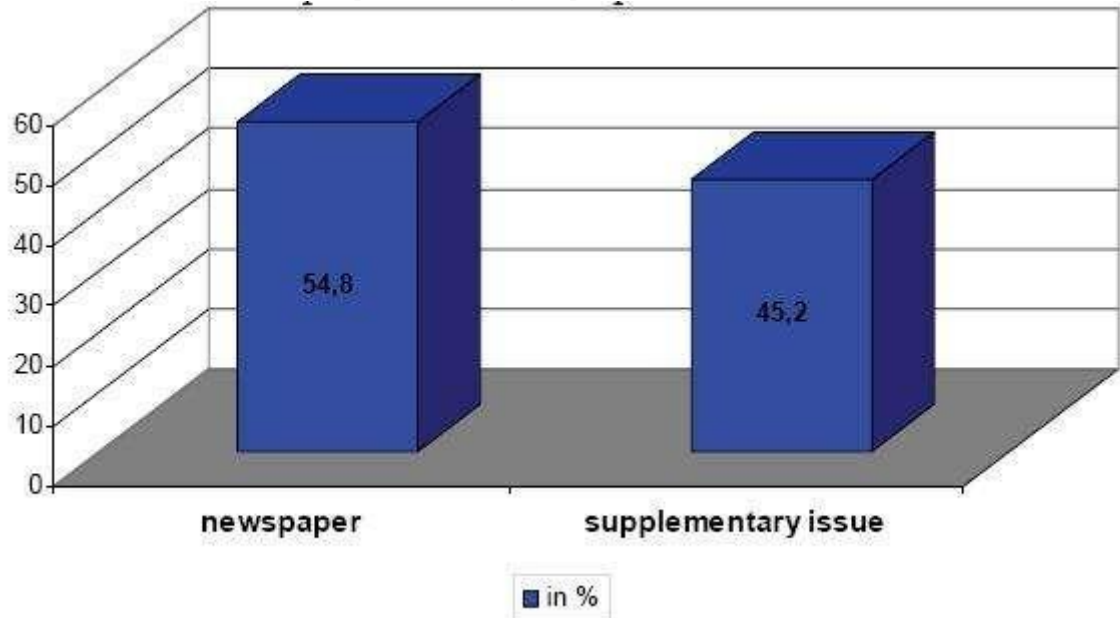
Our research question can be confirmed; covert advertising in Slovene press appears; with an average of 4,67 article on a newspaper. We analysed three newspapers with their supplementary issues for six days. In that period we found 84 texts containing covert advertising. This means on an average 4,67 articles on a newspaper. From those 84 texts, 38 (45,2%) were from Dnevnik, 28 (33,3%) from Delo and 18 (21,4%) from Večer.

Graph 1: Number and % of the text with covert advertising in 3 journals



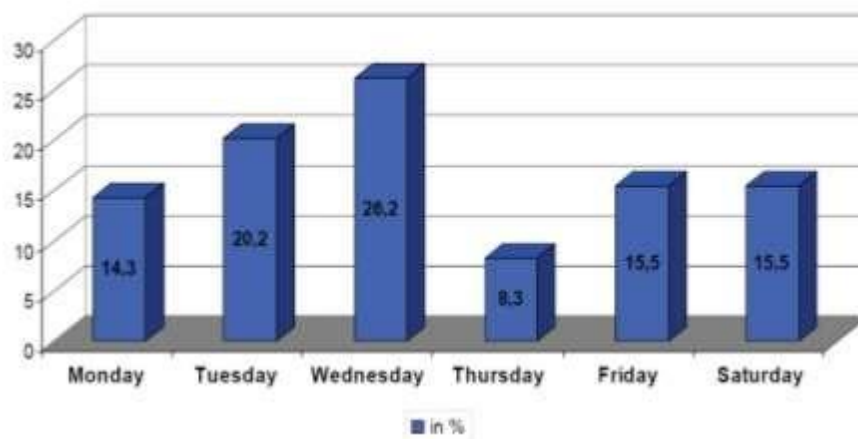
Thirty-eight (45, 2%) of texts with covert advertising were published in supplementary issues and 46 (54, 8%) in a text in a newspaper.

Graph 2: Place of the publication



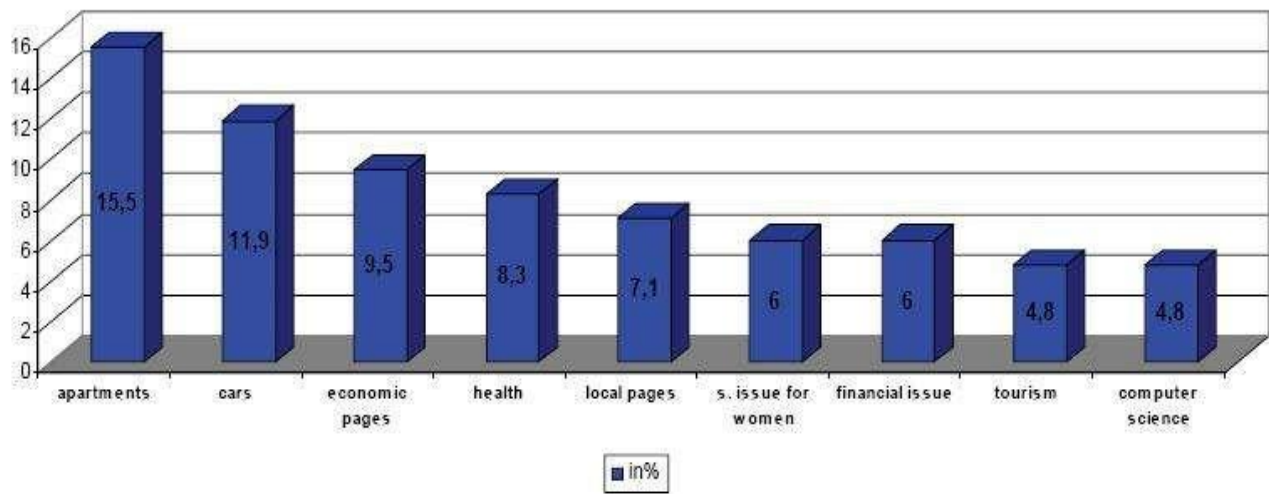
The most published texts (that is 22 texts, 26, 2%) with covert advertising were on Wednesday and atleast on Thursday – 7 texts, (8, 3%).

Graph 3: Covert advertising by day of the week

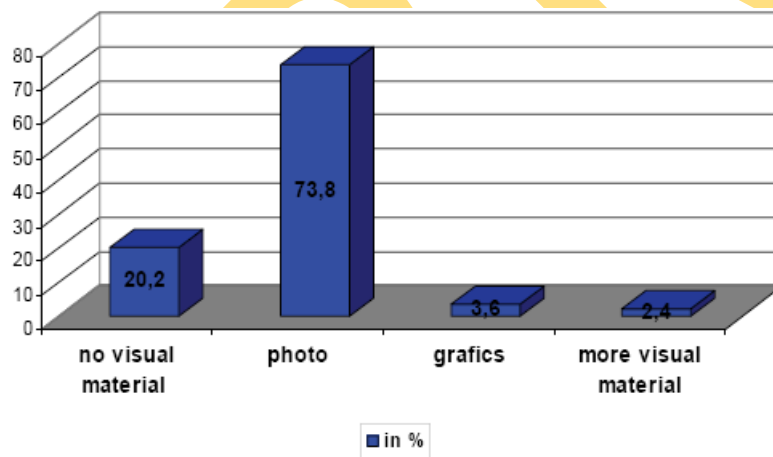


The highest number of covert advertising is found in columns of apartments 13 (15, 5%), cars 10 (11,9%) and health 9 (10, 7), they had a picture or other visual material, mostly in a form of a report 27 (32, 1%), where covert advertising is hidden throughout the whole text 37 (44%) yet with a very outstanding title.

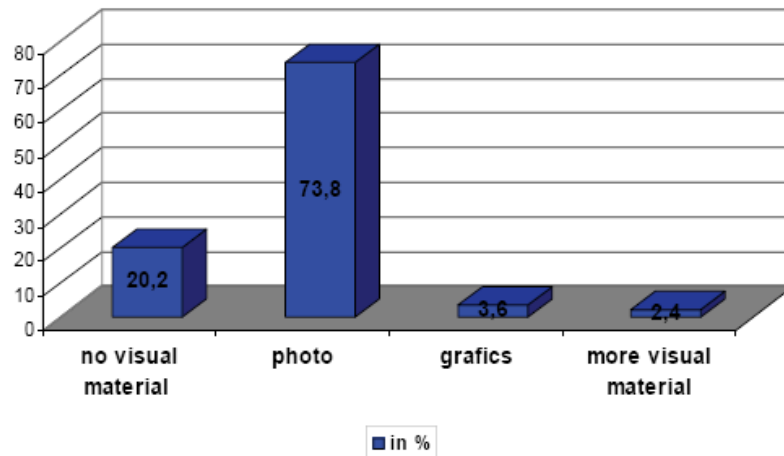
Graph 4: Covert advertising by rubric



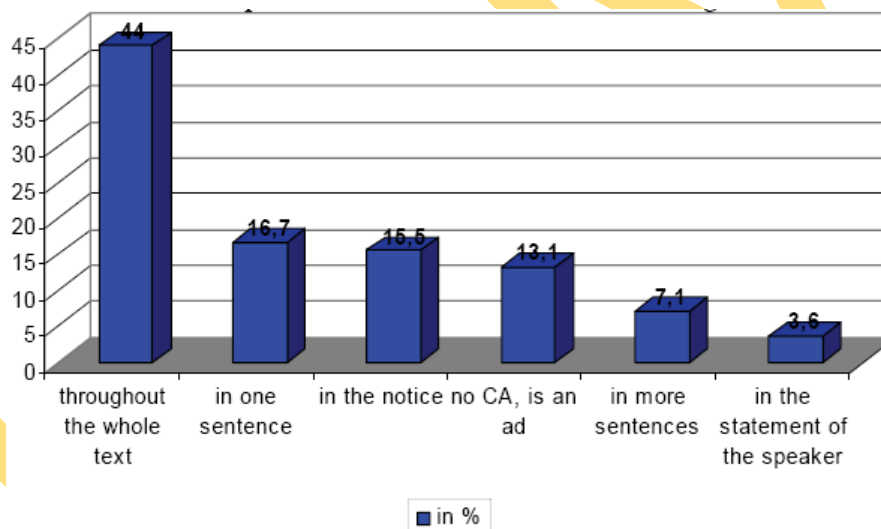
Graph 5: *Covert advertising by visual presentation*



Graph 6: Covert advertising by type of the article



Graph 7: Form of the covert advertising



- Public expects an article it can believe but this is not possible in a form of covert advertising.
- In Slovenia exists three laws (media law, law on protection of competition, and consumer protection law) and self-regulation acts agains covert advertising. Noone deals with them, not many people inform court about it, no-one is in charge to inspect media, and Slovene space is too small for so many media.
- There are four most important causes of covert advertising: (1) economic pressures and profit, (2) supply and demand for covert advertising in the market, (3) pressures of advertisers and bribing journalists and (4) inefficient regulations of organs of state.
- The biggest problem is definetely economic power of advertisers; media must not indulge on the pressure of advertisers.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As we have already stated, covert advertising appears in Slovene press media; having researched three most important Slovene print journals we have come to the conclusion that there is on average 4, 67 article on a newspaper.

However, public expects journalists to write objective and trustworthy texts which they can believe and according to which they can come up with some solutions either for themselves or for a society. But this is not possible in case of covert advertising because such ad has a form of a journalistic text, it is published among other editorial contents and there is a journalist's or an editor's signature at its bottom. However, journalists should protect public from manipulation like covert advertising is and they should take on responsibility for their actions.

Having all the rules, which define field of media and all self-regulations which define covert advertising as unethical, has no meaning if they cannot solve the problem. Journalists see the problem of covert advertising in the way market of press media functions, then in economic power of advertisers and in organizer's run for the biggest profit possible. According to Day (2006, 249), the obsession with cutting costs to maximize profits is systemic to large chains, and the ultimate loser is the reader and viewer.

There are two forms of legal organization; law organization and self-regulation which are very important because it fulfills legal directives. Since self-regulation is very flexible and temporary it attracts more attention than fixed and inflexible laws. In practice, self-regulation is more efficient, because it was formed in advertisers' field and it works in that way. It enables quicker and cheaper way of solving problems as far as questionable ads are concerned.

It is obviously that laws and self-regulation acts do not apply here. The problem is even bigger because these violations cannot be proven, covert ads are hard to define and recognize. Moreover we do not know how a journalist has worked and what his sources of information are. So we strongly believe that it is obligatory for an individual, be it a journalist, an advertiser or a representative of public relations to work in an ethical way. But if it is profit what drives society than recognizing covert ads is a longlasting and pretentious process. A professional vision of journalism ends at a time when our society needs a critical reportorial force; instead, a promotional journalism emerges, benefiting commerce and legitimizes the function of advertising in the „commercialization of culture“ (Erjavec 2004, 573-574).

At the end, there arises a very interesting question: are the readers aware of covert advertising? Can they see a difference between a covert ad and other texts? Many people do not know laws and regulations concerning media. Readers should, in time, become more critical to what they read because that would put media on test and readers would no longer find them a credible source of information. However, every individual should behave ethically and this would contribute most to the solution.

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