The Sift® News Goggles

Ad or news?

April 26, 2021
First things first

• Be sure to view these slides in presentation mode.
• Suzannah and Hannah, former reporters who work at NLP, are going to help you examine this topic through journalists’ eyes.
When it comes to advertising, not everything online is as it first appears. Some ads, for example, are designed to look like news stories. To make things trickier, this kind of advertising has different names and is marked with different labels, including “sponsored content,” “native advertising,” “advertorial,” “paid post,” or hashtags such as #ad or #sponsored.

This week, let's use our news goggles to tell the difference between ads and news — even when they look alike!
Let’s say you are scrolling for news on the Axios website and come across this post on your device ...

What is it? Is it a news story? Advertising? Do you see any clues?

Electric cooperatives are leading by managing the transition in the electric sector and engaging their members to introduce energy innovation to more communities.

Key numbers: U.S. cooperatives are energy providers and engines of economic growth for 42 million
Here’s the big clue: This is “A message from the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.” Even though the Axios logo appears at the top and the larger font looks like a headline, this item was not written by Axios staff. It’s an ad.

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For reference, here is an Axios news story. I’m struck by how similar these pieces are in appearance! The bolded words, image placement, headline, even the font style and size — it all makes them look like the same type of content. That’s why it’s always good to take a closer look!

Nurturing energy innovation in rural communities

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Celebration and catharsis filled the streets of Minneapolis yesterday. After weeks on edge, many breathed a sigh of relief upon hearing Judge Peter Cahill read the sweep of guilty verdicts against Derek Chauvin.

What they’re saying: ‘George Floyd isn’t
One more thought: Like other news organizations, Axios has different types of ads on its website, such as this one from Walmart. Many news stories include hyperlinks (a previous News Goggles topic!), but when I click on this one it takes me to Walmart’s website. It’s important to remember that not all ads look the same.
The New York Times
Let’s say you are scrolling for news and come across this post on The New York Times mobile app ...

What is this? Is it a news story? Advertising? Do you see any clues?
The big clue here is the label “Paid Post” above the image. It might be confusing at first because “More News” has the same kind of font and size and appears beneath. But this is another ad.
USA Today
Let’s say you are scrolling for news on the USA Today website and come across this post on your device ...

Are all of these news stories? Are any advertising? How can you know?
This one made me do a double take! Did you think these were all news stories at first glance? I did. The shape, light gray background, image placement and font all look the same. Only upon closer inspection did I notice the words “Story from Rocket Mortgage.” That was the biggest clue for me, since this suggests that the post is not from USA Today staff. Let’s click it …
Interesting! Look, we’re still on the USA Today website, and this story does at first look like other USA Today news reports. It’s even labeled as a “story,” but its byline is “Rocket Mortgage” — not USA Today staff. I wonder what happens when I click the little “i” next to “Story from Rocket Mortgage.”
Ah, here we go. This note tells us that this “story” was “paid for by an advertiser,” making it an ad — not a news report. Also, like I suspected, “Members of the editorial and news staff of the USA TODAY Network were not involved in the creation of this content.”
Look! Here’s another ad on the USA Today website, but this one looks more like an ad to me at first glance and also includes the label “Advertisement.”
Instagram
Let’s say you are scrolling on Instagram and come across this post ...

There’s no vaccine for climate change. Are we prepared for extreme weather to be our new normal?  
Water cycle and life cycle are one.

liked by izz_danzz and 2,480 others

mothershiponearth To ensure that Singapore has a sustainable source of water in the long run, everyone has to play our part by making every drop of water count. When less water is consumed, it also means less energy output from our treatment plants which in turn reduces our collective carbon footprint. #sponsored

Is this a news story? Is it advertising? Do you see any clues?
These photos look newsy to me. The text on top of the photos also has a newsy tone or feels like a headline. But look! At the bottom of the post is “#sponsored” — a common hashtag for ads. This is not news. It’s an ad.
News Goggles: Next steps

**Discuss:** Have you ever mistaken an ad online or on social media for a news story? What made you think it was a news story? Do you think it is important for people to know the difference between news stories and advertisements? Which of these examples of advertising would you say is most responsibly and clearly labeled? Which is most confusing?

**Idea:** Ask students to keep a journal for a week on examples of different advertising, including branded content, that they come across as part of their typical news consumption. What labels do they notice? Were some ads hard to identify?

**Resources:** “InfoZones” and “Branded Content” (NLP’s Checkology® virtual classroom); Informable® (NLP’s free mobile app).
This exercise originated in the April 26, 2021, issue of The Sift® newsletter from the News Literacy Project. You can read archives of the newsletter and subscribe [here](https://news-lit-project.org/the-sift).
Thank you!