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## ► To cite this version:

Innocent Bora Uzima. Advertising and Journalistic Objectivity: An Issue of Ethics in African's Media in a Case of the Democratic Republic of Congo. *Advances in Journalism and Communication*, 2024, 12 (01), pp.73 - 91. 10.4236/ajc.2024.121004 . halshs-04534496

**HAL Id: halshs-04534496**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04534496>**

Submitted on 5 Apr 2024

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# Advertising and Journalistic Objectivity: An Issue of Ethics in African's Media in a Case of the Democratic Republic of Congo

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**How to cite this paper:** Uzima, I. B. (2024). Advertising and Journalistic Objectivity: An Issue of Ethics in African's Media in a Case of the Democratic Republic of Congo. *Advances in Journalism and Communication*, 12, 73-91.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/ajc.2024.121004>

**Received:** November 19, 2023

**Accepted:** February 5, 2024

**Published:** February 8, 2024

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## Abstract

The aim of this article was to show the ethical and deontological deviations linked to the growing practice of advertorials by journalists in the Congolese media, and the influence that advertisers exert on editorial content and journalists' objectivity. The study sought to determine how Congolese journalists perceive the practice of advertorials in relation to the sacrosanct principle of journalistic objectivity. The ethical impact of journalists' involvement in advertising, and of advertisers' participation in the editorial content of Congolese media, was also examined. The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed from an inductive perspective, using an interpretative logic of content, and the explanation of the phenomenon under study was based on two theories from the ethical tradition of communication: the theory of social responsibility and the theory of truth.

## Keywords

Advertorial, Advertising Information, Congolese Journalists, Congolese Medias, Objectivity, Ethics and Deontology, Journalistic Content, Journalistic Information, Social Responsibility, African Journalists, African Media, DRC

## 1. Introduction

Advertorial is generally defined as a method of commercial promotion involving the publication, in print, on television, on the Internet or in any other media, of information promoting the use of a brand or product sold by the person or organization financing the information. Also known as brand content, it can appear in various traditional media or on the web, and can take several forms: an

article, a broadcast, a video report or an audio report. Depending on the company's news, objectives, projects or target audience, advertorials can focus on very specific subjects, or simply on presenting the company. It is therefore advertising disguised as journalistic content focused on information, according to the style and charter of the media on which it is published (Médias-France, 2018). An advertorial is not independent information, because its content is written under the control of the company that finances it. It is a form of advertising that presents in detail the characteristics of a service or product offering. It is always informative and allows a very precise and detailed message to be conveyed (Lemeya, 2016). In contrast, traditional advertising focuses on the image of products and companies. The principle of advertorials is to blend the realism of journalism with the commercial side of advertising (Agence-Impresseo, 2021). As Benoit Marchal, a well-known web consultant quoted by Pascal Pelletier, points out, the essential difference lies in the aim to sell in the case of advertorials and to inform in the case of news articles (Pelletier, 2023). Indeed, from an ethical point of view, the difference is that advertorial, i.e. the writing of an article for strictly advertising purposes, constitutes a second category of advertising, and must generally be carried out by people outside the editorial team. Hence a journalist, whatever the type of media (radio, television, press, web), cannot in principle lend his or her pen and name to advertorials (Gregori, 2015).

To clarify and affirm the existence of ethical facts linked to the influences of advertising on the objectivity of journalists in the media, Moumounie, citing Bourdieu (1996) and Elias (1991), has shown that the journalistic field, as one of the main fields that structure social space, is made up of singular agents or actors who engage in competitive relationships with a view to producing and disseminating information. Today, the discursive identities of the three fields of public communication (information, advertising and public relations) overlap, intermingle and sometimes merge into an indistinguishable whole. We are increasingly witnessing a blurring of the boundaries between media content. News and advertising are becoming "decompartmentalized", merging into a hybrid genre known as advertorial or editorial advertising in newspapers, or infomercials on television (Moumounie, 2006). From the confusion that has since taken hold in the media due to the difficulty of distinguishing between advertising content and news content, advertorial poses the bed for real ethical challenges in relation to the principle of journalistic objectivity in Africa, in general, and in the DRC, in particular.

According to Gauthier (1991), the most general, natural and widespread conception of journalistic objectivity is the correspondence of the news with the reality on which it is based. Objectivity in journalism is the supposed ability to report facts as they happen. It is by virtue of this characterization that objectivity can be received as a criterion for evaluating journalistic practice (McQuail, 1986). As in most countries of the world, particularly in Africa and the DRC, objectivity in the treatment and presentation of information is essentially considered as a principal quality on the basis of which to judge the credibility of the journalist or

the information he or she presents, and which serves to establish a difference between a professional journalist and other categories of public information practitioners. Journalistic objectivity means reporting the facts fairly and equitably, without favouring one point of view at the expense of another. This notion is usually at the top of media ethics guidelines. For a given subject, a journalist's mandate is to present "both sides of the story". Objectivity is essential to informing the public (Prévost, 2023).

Generally speaking, in the DRC's media and information environment, professional circles and journalism schools perceive journalistic objectivity in the same sense as most authors who have asserted that the concept of objectivity is often replaced in journalism by related notions such as neutrality or impartiality ((Bernier (2014); Gauthier (1991); Tuchman (1972); Merrill (1984) and Dennis (1984)). Some other authors even consider that respect for objectivity is useful because it consecrates a return to the fundamentals of journalism. Guy Parent, citing Chalaby (1998), has argued that the search for truth, honesty, accuracy and impartiality, which are all skills that define journalistic objectivity, are also the units of measurement that enable citizens to find their way around and better distinguish between information and disinformation (Parent, 2021).

According to Osée Kamga (2019), journalistic objectivity should be understood as the effort that each journalist, in his or her own context, makes to respect the conventions that frame his or her practice. It's the journalist's propensity to cross-check facts with independent sources, to faithfully render the thoughts of the authors quoted, taking into account the context in which the extracts were stated, to state his or her ideological position or political preferences where necessary, and above all, to write in an honest style, i.e. one that respects the requirements of the genre. The aim is to ensure that a report is clearly a report, and not a masked editorial (a philosophical and subjective article), and that a review is truly a review, and not an unnamed criticism or advertisement. In this article, we look at the ethical aspects of the impact of advertising on the objectivity of journalists in the African media in general, and in the DRC in particular.

### 1.1. Problem Statement

All over the world, the media fulfill their role as intermediaries facilitating social interaction through the profession of journalism, governed by specific ethical and deontological standards set on the basis of an ideal. The reality observed currently in most African countries and in the DRC in particular is that journalists' professional corporations have set up codes of ethics to guide journalistic practices. However, there is a considerable gap between what the code of journalistic ethics and deontology requires and what journalists actually do in the media. As Osée Kamga has pointed out, citing Cornu (2009), the emergence of the multiple press, which marked the end of political monolithism in sub-Saharan Africa in the early 1990s, nurtured hopes for the advent of authentic journalism, i.e. neither driven by personal interests, nor sold out to those of others, nor devious strategists, nor benighted or manipulated (Kamga, 2019). In the DRC, for

example, media outlets (print, radio, television, online media) do not benefit from state subsidies, but operate in a precarious state, dependent on advertisers and the highest bidder for survival. This state of resourcefulness has led many media outlets and journalists in Africa to use their profession not only to inform the public, but also to raise funds either for their businesses or for themselves.

Indeed, the current dominant trend among journalists and newsrooms is to transform all information gathered from sources into advertorials, and to use the space devoted to information for advertising, to the detriment of public information. As Domela and Michel pointed out in reference to Cégolène Frisque's assertion, more and more journalists are turning to activities outside journalism to achieve a certain economic equilibrium. They are turning mainly to communication, and this poses a real problem because these are opposing fields in terms of ethics (...) and the growing hold of communication is a real problem today (Domela & Michel, 2019). The trend is not only growing, but the practice has become almost generalized and ordinary in the Congolese media, to the point where the dissemination of information is conditioned and often subjected by the journalist to the payment of advertorial fees by his source of information (organization, individual, association). This ties in with a study that showed how sponsored content has grown rapidly in recent years, the results of which established that 73 percent of journalists in online media and major news outlets offered some form of this type of advertising (...) and this growth is linked to both the need for journalism companies to find new sources of revenue and the value that brands themselves attach to this type of content (Fitzgerald, 2015).

Media that respect the ethics and deontology of journalism take the precaution of explicitly specifying that what they are broadcasting is advertising, by adding the word "Advertorial". Most Congolese media fail to do this, while the majority of article headlines are made up solely of advertising-related information, in defiance of the ethical standards that govern the profession of journalist and the media in the country.

In the context of the DRC, it is often the case that the media run after advertisers or their sources of information to offer them special (attractive) advertising space, even in news editions, as is the case with advertorials. This approach places the media outlet or journalist in a position of subservience to the demands of the advertiser or source of information who ensures a positive return on the funds paid to the media outlet. As a result, the editorial integrity of the journalist and the media is compromised, as they feel more beholden to their source than to their audience. Articles 23, 24 and 25 of the new law on the press, media and communication in the DRC state that journalists are forbidden to lend their voice or pen to advertising, and article 26 prohibits the media from sacrificing other sections for advertising (Présidence de la RDC, 2023). Similarly, article 7 of the Code of Ethics and Deontology for Congolese Journalists calls on Congolese journalists not to accept any present from sources of information, any advantage or gift for disseminating or suppressing information, or any gratification for

publishing, distorting or suppressing information (UNPC, 2004).

The case under discussion here is the more or less abusive use of advertorials in the Congolese media, by journalists, to the detriment of public information. The idea is simply to discuss the ethical implications of advertising in media editorial content, while calling for strict respect for objectivity. Thus, the aim is to find answers to the following research questions: How do journalists perceive the use of advertorials in media practices in the DRC? What ethical impact does advertising have on the objectivity of Congolese journalists?

## 1.2. Objectives

The aim is to:

- To analyze the place that advertorials currently occupy as a type of information in journalists' perceptions and in media content (editorial teams);
- To explore the ethical and deontological challenges linked to the attraction of advertising in the media, and which affect the professional objectivity of journalists in fulfilling their social mission;
- Evaluate the impact of advertorials on the definition of a journalist's work (media) in the Congo, in relation to his or her social responsibility to inform the masses;
- To put forward a number of recommendations aimed at delimiting the ethical and deontological deviations linked to the growth of advertising activities in the practices of journalists, and to clear up the confusion in the editorial content of the media, based on the theoretical and practical gap that exists between the social responsibility of the journalist and the commercial responsibility of an advertising agent.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Theoretical Framework

We will therefore attempt to discuss the question of the objectivity of infomercials in the practices of journalists (media), drawing on a number of theories from the communication ethics tradition. Communication ethics addresses the problem of what is ethical and starts with the issue of honesty versus lying. To describe the foundation of this communication tradition, Griffin (2012) cited three of the National Communication Association (NCA) creed's nine principles below: We advocate truthfulness, accuracy, honesty, and reason as essential to the integrity of communication (It speaks to the question of obligation); We accept responsibility for the short- and long-term consequences of our own communication and expect the same of others (It raises the question of outcomes); We strive to understand and respect other communicators before evaluating and responding to their messages (It bids us to look at our motives and attitudes).

Griffin (2012) conceives of communication ethics in the sense of Friendship as defined by Bill Rawlins, who showed that the friends negotiate their relation-

ship voluntarily, care about each other's well-being, respect each other as equals, and engage in ongoing learning about each other. They also trust and are trustworthy, are respectively honest, and give special attention to other's needs and desires. Ethically speaking, and within a media framework of disseminating information or news, objectivity would dictate that communication between a journalist (media) and his audience should be comparable to a relationship of friendship characterized by the reign of trust and honesty between partners, and in which the journalist is called upon to pay particular attention to the needs and desires of the public to be fairly, honestly and truthfully informed about real facts or events.

The phenomenon of unethical advertorials in the Congolese media is explained through two theories of ethical communication: social responsibility and truth. Social responsibility theory is a professional ethics practice with credibility and oriented to duty rather than rights (Cheney, May, & Munsh, 2011). Inspired by the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press in the United States in 1947, this theory of social responsibility insists on the duty of the media (and the journalist) to serve society, rather than to facilitate the interests and be pressured by business or government to ensure their freedom and the responsibility of the Press. Social responsible news is defined by its duties to the community. Citing the Commission, these authors indicated that for social responsibility theory, it is the journalists' duty to provide a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning. Thus, literature indicate that this social responsibility theory provides moral guidelines for what it called Global Journalism Ethics (Ward, 2005). This theory explains how the social responsibility of the journalist (media) is affected and called into question by the fact that his regalian duty as intermediary between the public and events or facts, by making known the truth, is diverted towards economic interests by the influence and attraction towards advertising information, to the detriment of public information.

Truth, is a journalism ethics theory which states, in the words of Jaspers (1955: p. 77) quoted by Cheney et al. (2011), that "the moment of communication is at one and the same time the presentation on and a search for the truth (...) The press's obligation to truth is a standard part of its rhetoric. Virtually every code of ethics in journalism begins with the newsperson's duty to tell the truth under all circumstances. The facts in news have been said to mirror reality. The aim has been true and incontrovertible accounts of a domain separate from human consciousness. News corresponds to context-free algorithms, and journalistic morality is equivalent to the unbiased reporting of neutral data" (Cheney, May, & Munsh, 2011: p. 196). This theory of truth serves to explain how the growing attraction of advertorial or brand content practices in the Congolese public information media has disorientated journalists from their objectivity and their role of giving the public news that is true and relates the reality of the facts, in favor of commercial information oriented by advertisers.



## 2.2. Empirical Review

Parent (2021) affirmed that journalism is a profession that is learned and practiced by following a certain number of ethical standards that define the portrait of what could be called an ideal journalism. This would be journalism that aims to enable citizens to better know and understand the world in which they live. We can see this ideal journalism taking shape in the various codes of ethics and standards of practice adopted over time by media companies and journalists' associations in Quebec, Canada, the United States and Europe.

Sonnac (2006) has recognized that one of the main features of the media, and perhaps the most significant, concerns the way in which media production is financed: the profitability of most media activities, television, cinema, radio, periodicals, newspapers, depends crucially on the ability to finance a large proportion of these activities through advertising. In addition to other sources of revenue (e.g., newspaper copy sales, pay-per-view TV or radio programs, pages on news websites, etc.), media companies derive part of their income from the sale of advertising space. So, the bulk of media funding usually comes from advertising, and so far this has not been a problem in terms of the objectivity of the media itself, or of the journalists.

Mantrala et al. (2007) have shown that the media derive most of their revenue from advertisers rather than consumers. Under these conditions, the influence of advertisers on media content is significant, and can be detrimental to consumer welfare. The interests of various players in public communication and other social actors tend to take precedence over public information, resulting in unclear and unethical content. Media (journalistic) content is manipulated, falsified or biased in favor of these different interests, and the social welfare of access to true information is sacrificed. As a result, the notion of objectivity gives way to self-serving subjectivity (and sometimes lies).

The literature on the political economy of the media has long emphasized that media dependence on advertising revenue has a number of negative consequences. These include the production of information that fosters a business-friendly environment, self-censorship of information that could damage an advertiser's reputation, which is a major concern (Bagdikian (2000); Baker (1994); Herman and Chomsky (1988); Herman and McChesney (1997); McChesney (1999); and Mosco (1996)).

Research (Richards & Murphy II, 1996) has provided anecdotal evidence of several cases of advertisers threatening to withdraw their advertising budgets from media outlets that have published undesirable information about the company or its products. Surveys also show that journalists are subject to pressure from corporate advertisers (Soley & Craig, 1992). And as Deckop et al. (2003) point out, reciprocity ensures that social actors who grant favorable treatment can be confident that the debt will be repaid. This means that, in one way or another, the companies that advertise or source the information exert pressure that has led to changes in media content in television and print (Richards &



Murphy II (1996); Steinem (1990)).

There are even empirical studies based on surveys conducted by journalists that have found strong support for media bias in newspaper advertising (Soley & Craig, 1992) and television networks (Price, 2003). However, journalists are generally regarded as professionals governed by particular rules.

Bourdieu (1996: p. 161) points out that the “journalistic field” differs from the “media field” in that it is autonomous and autonomist. It is endowed with pure rationality and tends towards civic and cultural “symbolic capital”. Thus, in the media space, journalism is distinct from advertising and public relations. Bourdieu (1994: pp. 23-24) had also argued that, from an autonomist point of view, advertorials cannot lay claim to the “symbolic capital” or “habitus” of the journalistic field, since the supposed self-referentiality of journalism reflects the image of a pure, orthodox, recursive profession, which essentially seeks its civic purpose, is able to distance itself from what is not itself or, ultimately, to accept it only according to its own rationality. The self-referential discursive approach to journalism asserts the journalist’s powers and means over his or her own functioning and destiny. Any influence from his environment is described as “contamination”, an “anomaly”, a “foreign body”. For Bourdieu, infomercials are seen as an unacceptable transgression of the journalistic norm. In this sense, infomercials are ethically illegal.

Clifford (2011) has indicated that the utilitarian ethical principle as developed by Jeremy Bentham holds that the maximization of human well-being is the only factor by which the morality of an action can be judged. And in this sense, John Stewart Mill (1998: p. 137) asserted, among other things, that [...] actions are good in so far as they tend to promote happiness, and bad in so far as they tend to produce the opposite of happiness. Utilitarians therefore believe in the principle of impartiality: the only thing that matters is maximizing well-being, regardless of who benefits from it. The individual does not count for more than the interests of others, if this participation maximizes optimal consequences. This maxim states that in the responsibility of the press (print, broadcast, web or online), even the interest of the journalist, an individual (source of information) or a small group (company or advertiser) counts no more than the interest (welfare, information or news) of the greater number (the public or society).

Utard (2003) asserts that the journalist is a model built in opposition to its counter-model: the advertiser. The latter is linked to the source of information, the advertiser, in order to strategically promote products whose consumption refers to the satisfaction of individual interests. Conversely, the journalist is independent of his source, reporting objectively on facts that are in the public interest. The mission of the journalist or the functions of the press (news media) are above all social, making journalism a profession at the service of society. Thus, the essence of journalistic activity is to serve the interests of the public, rather than a third party, a company, or even one’s own interests. For Utard (2003), journalism’s self-referential discursive approach to advertising and public relations can be summarized as follows: Journalism is synonymous with civic

rationality, public interest, information and opinion; Public relations is synonymous with organizational rationality, private interest, press release, advertorial, Advertising is synonymous with economic rationality, private interests, announcements, publicity, sponsorship, advertorials. In the above configuration, we note the absence of advertorials in the journalistic field. Thus, respecting the rules and principles (ethical and deontological) of the reserved domain of each field of public information and communication would mean not envisaging any form of hybridization. Infomercials remain in the field of advertising or public relations, and journalism retains its own frame of reference, namely objectivity in the treatment of information or news.

Kamga (2019), referred to the work of Hien Ollo Pépin (2005) on the crisis of journalism and public space in Africa, in which he spoke of a journalism that has gone astray and is misguided. He showed that, in short, the literature presents a portrait of journalism devoid of the classic standards of objectivity, i.e., of that “critical distance from reality” that has enabled the practice to appear legitimate in the movement to constitute a public space for debate. The author argues that without deontological and ethical standards, journalism would lose the foundations that give it the role of guardian of the public interest. To put forward the idea of journalistic objectivity is therefore not just a conceptual necessity, i.e. one that aims to define a field, it is a moral requirement.

Gauthier (2004) and Martin (2004), drawing on the ideas of Searle (1998), define journalistic information as a set of epistemically objective statements, i.e. statements that can be verified as true or false. In this sense, it seems an intrinsic imperative or natural ethical obligation of journalism to produce only true statements. The journalistic field is limited to what is real, true and lived. It does not open itself up to fiction or the distortion of reality in order to preserve its objective and ethical character. Although recognized as a hybrid media genre that combines advertising and journalistic methods, infomercials do not belong to the classical journalistic field. Most observers believe that news is in crisis because advertising has made it sick (Moumounie, 2006).

Louis Farladeau (1990), the former Secretary General of the Fédération des journalistes professionnels du Québec (FPJQ), highlighted that “advertising and marketing have come to stand between journalists and the public and have falsified the rules of the game”. The journalist deplored the fact that today journalists are asked not only to inform, but also to entertain, to please advertisers and to serve the private interests of the newspaper and its boss. In this context, the journalist and the media are no longer autonomous, lose their objectivity and no longer know how to assume their social responsibilities, since they are at the service of advertising.

In a book entitled “The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect”, two American researchers (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001) have produced a work that can be seen as an outline for decoding the genome of journalism. They highlighted nine principles that could constitute the “symbolic capital” of the self-referential journalistic field, or at least the nine

commandments of journalism: 1) journalism's first obligation is to the truth; 2) its first loyalty is to the public; 3) its essence is rigorous verification; 4) it must retain its independence from sources; 5) it must serve as an independent counterweight; 6) it must be a place of public debate and compromise; 7) it must strive to make important information interesting; 8) it must make information comprehensible without lapsing into sensationalism; 9) its professionals must be able to exercise their free will. A reading of these principles shows that the field of media journalism is nowhere open to hybridization, since it has its own frame of reference, as Utard described for both advertising and public relations, each of which has its own frame of reference.

### **2.3. Summary of the Literature Review**

The study is based on two theories from the ethical tradition of communication that addresses the problem of what is ethical and starts with the issue of honesty versus lying. The theory of social responsibility insists on the duty of the media (and the journalist) to serve society rather than facilitate the interests and be under pressure from business or government to ensure their freedom and the responsibility of the Press. Truth theory states that the moment of communication is at one and the same time the presentation on and a search for the truth. Thus, the press's obligation to truth is a standard part of its rhetoric.

The empirical review provides an overview of the various studies carried out on different ethical challenges linked to the practices of advertorial by journalists or advertising in media editorial content, and the ethical and deontological problems affecting the objectivity of journalists worldwide and in Africa. It includes research into the influence of advertising or advertisers on journalistic content and the growing attachment of (media) journalists to advertising as a preferred means of generating economic revenue, and the ethical problems resulting from this involvement of journalists in advertising. The studies explored ethical principles of journalism affected by journalistic deviations, such as duty, truth, independence of information and of the journalist or media, honesty and the journalist's social responsibility. In general, these studies provide interesting benchmarks on how advertorial practices have affected the editorial content of the media, the editorial autonomy of the media and how advertisers distract journalists from objectivity, and how the economic interests generated by advertising information tend to disorient journalists from their responsibility to serve commercial and private interests to the detriment of public information.

## **3. Methodology**

The study was based on a qualitative approach which is interpretive research whose term, according to Thorne (2014) citing Bohman et al. (1991), refers to a fundamental recognition that human interpretation is the appropriate starting point for the study of the social world (Pascale, 2011), as well as the point towards which research findings are ultimately directed. The approach has been,

through direct interviews and content analysis of respondents' answers, to seek to understand the meanings of the actions or practices of journalists (media) in the DRC, i.e. to identify the roles (responsibilities) assigned in view of ethical and deontological rules. It was also a question of identifying the roles (responsibilities) assumed by journalists in the exercise of their profession of informing society, in order to draw out an interpretation and understand their perception of the practice of advertorial and journalistic objectivity, but also the reasons for their strong attraction to advertising to the detriment of objective public information. The study audience consisted of journalists from various types of news media. Thus, to arrive at the results, all the information gathered from respondents during individual interviews with 10 journalist-reporters (2 TV, 2 Radio, 2 Print, 2 Online and 2 multi-skilled) on the issue of advertising and journalistic objectivity in the media was analyzed using content analysis of the answers given. It seems essential that the participants are heard and that their opinions (judgments, meaning or significance of the realities) stand out strongly in this study. For this reason, we have chosen in-depth interviews as the source of data. The aim was to apprehend thoughts, conceptualize them, study their meaning and decode them to establish the meaning or interpretation of the respondents' words.

#### **4. Findings, Analysis and Interpretation**

Based on our objectives, we formulated our results (findings) under four themes, which we summarize below:

- 1) The place of advertorials in journalists' perceptions and in media content.
- 2) Impact of advertorials on the definition of a journalist's (media) work in the Congo.
- 3) Ethical and deontological challenges of the media's attraction to advertising and its effect on the journalist's objectivity.

##### **4.1. The Place of Advertorials in Journalists' Perceptions and in Media Content**

The study found that advertorials are perceived by Congolese journalists (media) as social information, in the same way as other journalistic content, but with the particularity of generating economic benefits. The general perception is that this particular or advertising character is often sought after or desired by most media on events to be reported. In this respect, it is more important for journalists to have an advertorial subject in the editorial content than to contain interesting information of a public or societal nature. Thus, commercial or political information for which the source has requested (paid for) an advertorial receives special and more serious treatment than all other types of information in the Congolese media. Respondents' testimonies indicate that some Congolese media outlets have set a rate for the discount to be received by a journalist who brings an advertorial to his or her editorial office. Hence, the interest, attachment and

motivation of journalists to attend an event are motivated by the publicity features of the event in question. The study also points out that some journalists make the dissemination of certain news items (radio sound bites, television videos, photo illustrations) conditional on payment by the source of an advertorial fee.

...when we finish the day without bringing a single advertorial to the editorial office, we feel as if we haven't done any important work. With advertorials, we get some financial dividends because journalists manage to make something in their pockets (Journalist 1).

...on the one hand, society—the general public—needs to be informed about what's going on locally and around the world, and on the other, journalists (media) need to find the resources to continue serving the masses. Advertorials enable us to meet this dual need (Journalist 3).

Indeed, the study reveals that in the perception and practices of Congolese journalists, advertorials take priority in terms of value in the hierarchy of editorial content, compared with social news, whose treatment must primarily meet the public need to know what is real and true.

#### **4.2. The Impact of Advertorials on the Definition of a Journalist's (Media) Work in the DRC and the Effect on Journalistic Objectivity**

The study found that the media have given an important place to the practice of advertorials in their editorial content. This trend not only has an impact on the perception of journalists, but also on the public's perception of the definition of information and the work of journalists (media) in society. Journalists believe that advertorials are important for their dual value of providing information and economic support for the journalist (or media outlet). Consequently, it occupies a priority position in the editorial content grid. The impact of this general perception in the Congolese media is that journalists themselves have a distorted definition of their role, mission and social responsibility. The frequent involvement of journalists in the practice of advertorial for economic interests, to the detriment of information of social value, tends to define journalism for the public as an advertising profession rather than a social function of honest information.

The negative effect of this growing and highly self-interested involvement in advertorial practices is that journalists are being converted into advertising agents, guided by a subjective and sometimes dishonest bias, in the interests of a commercial or political player, on whom their work now depends. Journalists are thus led to stray from their mission as social agents of information, whose editorial content conveys an objective and truthful judgment in the general interest.

...the advertorial phenomenon in our media outlets has made information on social facts seem less attractive or less important to journalists. There's a tendency to favour advertising information that will ensure a financial profit for

one's personal account and for one's media company. In a way, we're advertising agents too (Journalists 6, 9 and 10).

These findings show that the practice of advertorials by Congolese journalists (media) for economic purposes significantly undermines the objectivity, image, role and meaning of the work (mission) of journalists in the DRC, whose profile is supposed to be neutral, impartial, truthful and incompatible with the advertising function.

### **4.3. Ethical and Deontological Challenges of Attracting Journalists (Media) to Advertising**

The study establishes that journalists' attraction to advertising involves ethical and deontological challenges of various kinds. In terms of editorial content, most Congolese media have adopted the insertion of advertising information in editorial content as a revenue-generating strategy. As a result, journalists seek out information on social issues, focusing on those aspects that offer the potential for advertorials.

When it comes to differentiating between journalistic and advertising approaches, Congolese journalists don't realize that there is an ethical problem in either approach. Most believe that advertorials are news items treated in accordance with professional principles, even if they include advertising commentary. The ethical consequence is that journalists see themselves both as agents of social information and as advertising agents, journalism and advertising communication being two ethically and deontologically incompatible roles. And in the public perception, the confusion appears visible, as it appears difficult to distinguish between what is social information and what is advertising in media content.

In terms of the independence of information and the journalist, the practice of advertorials, through the income generated for the benefit of journalists (media), has established a relationship of strong dependence of journalists on the objectives or dictates of advertisers. In reality, advertisers are clients whom journalists see as privileged partners of the media, and whose desires (objectives) have taken precedence over the freedom of journalists (media). The strong economic dependence of journalists (media) means that they almost no longer have total decision-making power over editorial choices, giving advertisers the opportunity to influence the direction to be taken in the treatment and dissemination of information.

In terms of journalists' involvement in advertising content, the current practice in the Congolese media is for journalists to play both the social role of public information journalist and the role of advertising agent. For example, a journalist may present a general news edition and also lend his or her voice or image to an advertising spot (audio or video). Finally, in terms of advertisers' involvement in journalistic content, some Congolese media editors give in to pressure from advertisers, demanding the insertion of advertising content in journalistic content which, in principle, demands a high degree of objectivity and truthfulness. Other media outlets passively allow advertisers to censor and steer certain edi-

torial content before it is broadcast.

In addition to the fact that profit-seeking is the main motivation behind journalists' growing attraction to advertorial practices, the findings also establish that the media's poor economic capacity to meet their remuneration and operating needs is an influential factor in the failure to comply with the ethical and deontological rules and principles of journalism in the DRC.

#### **4.4. Summary**

Sections 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 provide insights or experiences from journalists that help to understand the meaning of advertorial practices in the media, in order to identify the influence of advertising on the objectivity of African and Congolese journalists, in particular. These sections are interconnected in the sense that journalists' perceptions of advertorials (whether biased or not) have a negative influence on journalistic practices, which in turn has an impact on the objectivity of information. Section 4.1 examines the place of advertorials in journalists' perceptions and in the editorial content of Congolese media. It shows how advertorials are considered by journalists as social information, but which is given a higher value than other editorial content due to the economic interests it generates for the media. Section 4.2 assesses the impact of advertorial practice on the definition (conceptualization) of the journalist's role in the DRC and its effect on journalistic objectivity. It analyzes the impact of journalists' perception on advertorials and the distorted conception that journalists themselves have of the definition of their role, mission and social responsibility. In this deviant perception, advertorials are prioritized by journalists (media) for economic interests, to the detriment of information of social value. As a result, advertorials tend to define journalism in the public or collective perception as an advertising profession devoid of any objectivity, rather than a social function of honest, impartial reporting. Finally, section 4.3 identifies the various ethical and deontological challenges associated with the influence of advertising on journalistic content in the Congolese media. It identifies ethical problems in terms of lack of impartiality and truth in editorial content, lack of visible differentiation between the journalistic approach and the advertising approach in journalists' practices, dependence of information and the journalist on the desire of advertising advertisers, journalists' participation in advertising content that calls for subjectivity and lies for commercial interests, and advertisers' participation in journalistic content that diverts Congolese journalists (media) from their social responsibility of objectivity and truth. By linking these three sections together, we can see the ethical implications of including advertising in media editorial content and the practices of Congolese journalists. Starting with the influence of advertising on the perception of journalists and audiences, but also the impact of advertisers' involvement in editorial content and the effect on journalistic objectivity, the growing attraction of journalists (media) to advertising information or advertorials highlights the existence of real ethical and deontological deviations in the



practices of Congolese journalists. These ethical and deontological challenges appear similar to the ethical issues identified in the European Council's guideline on journalistic ethics (2015).

## 5. Conclusion

The study highlighted the practices and perceptions of Congolese journalists (media) regarding advertorials, showing how advertising influences the objectivity of Congolese journalists (media) and how this influence raises ethical issues. The research focused on the media in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where advertorial—a genre resulting from the influence of advertising in the media—has become a phenomenon at the root of various ethical incidents in journalism (subjectivity, bias, lies, dependence on advertisers, private and commercial interests, etc.). Thus, starting from the distinction between journalism and other areas of public communication such as advertising and public relations, the study has highlighted, through a number of theories, the various incidents linked to the practice of advertorials in the media. Indeed, we consider that advertorials are not a media genre in the realm of journalism, but belong in the realms of advertising and public relations, even though they are all part of public communication. Advertising in journalistic content poses an ethical problem, because it presents the public with information that is not real (not true), biased (not objective) and misleading as true information, and serves the interest of the source or advertiser rather than the general interest. This poses an ethical problem of objectivity for journalists (media) in the African media, in general, and the Congolese media, in particular. There is no truth, no reality, no objectivity in infomercials or advertorials. The use made of it by journalists in the Congolese media falsifies the status of the journalist and threatens the existence of real information. What's more, out of a concern to generate revenue from advertisers and sources of information, advertising methods are used to the detriment of journalistic methods of objective treatment of information. From an ethical point of view, while advertising cannot be forbidden in the media, it must be treated in a way that is more specific than journalistic. In terms of its character and methods, advertorial can be considered a hybrid product of the fields of public communication that does not constitute a repository of pure journalism. Consequently, it is unethical and must be kept within the communicative field of advertising only.

## 6. Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following recommendations can be made:

- 1) To regulate the profession of journalist in such a way as to limit its practice to those who have completed at least a degree in journalism and communication;
- 2) To make the recruitment and the obtaining of a national journalist's card conditional on a minimum two-year professional training period, sanctioned by

a certificate of professional aptitude and compliance with the ethical and deontological rules of journalism;

3) To include provisions in the press, media and communication laws, which remove advertorials from the list of media editorial content falling within the remit of journalism, and classify them solely as totally advertising content;

4) To create a national fund to support media operations, promote social information journalism and provide free public access to objective information of social utility at local and international level;

5) To incorporate into the code of ethics and deontology for Congolese journalists' provisions prohibiting the practice of advertorials and the direct or indirect participation of journalists in advertising;

6) To strengthen UNPC branches throughout the country with ethically competent human resources and tools for monitoring and evaluating the compliance of journalists' practices with Congolese codes of ethics and deontology;

7) To implement management policies that give priority to the ongoing training of journalists in ethical and professional standards;

8) To treat media's editorial content and reporting according to ethical standards.

In-depth research must be carried out to develop objective methods and approaches to journalistic practices, based on virtue and social responsibility in the African and Congolese media in particular.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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