**Book Proposal**

**Branded Reality: The Rise of Branded Content and its Threat to Democracy**

**Dr. Anat Balint**

**Abstract**

*Branded Reality: The Rise of Branded Content and its Threat to Democracy* looks at the rise or the market of *Branded Content* and offers a new framework to think about the influence of money on media content and its threats to democracy in the digital age. As a media scholar and a former journalist, I uncover the story behind the sponsorship deals of two successful reality TV shows (“How to Look Good Naked” in the UK and “Overdraft Family” in Israel) by leading brands (Dove and others) and argues that commercialization in the digital age does not focus on products as such, but is a fluid and abstract phenomenon which allows brands to infiltrate multiple layers of the sponsored content across various platforms and subtly steer public debate. I demonstrate the dominance of branding processes as an engine for this market and explain how the reality TV genre has acted as a seedbed for hyper-commercialized content before and contemporaneously with social media influencers. Branded content is a pernicious form of manipulation that presents itself as editorial choice but is, in fact, advertising in disguise. Its growth has saturated the public sphere with manipulative content, spread skepticism, and harmed public trust in the media, something which is essential for the maintenance of public debate in democracies.

**Statement of Aims**

The proposed book *Branded Reality: The Rise of Branded Content and its Threat to Democracy* depicts the rise of the market for**branded content** and offers a new framework for understanding the influence of commercial money on the media in the digital age. By elucidating the story of two successful reality TV programs and their sponsorship deals, the book looks at a rapidly growing funding model in which sponsoring brands are integrated into media content.[[1]](#footnote-1) This model works to blur the line between advertising and content. It surged together with the rise of reality TV and just before the introduction of social media.

I am a media scholar at the University of Arizona and a former investigative journalist and my book will examine the lesser-known details of sponsorship agreements and the production process of popular shows to uncover, based on ample empirical evidence, how brands go far beyond the promotion of products into instrumentally steering public debate. I foreground the damage this new, manipulative form of content does to the media’s important role in democracies and show how money drives the spread of manipulative, fake content in the digital age.

The book looks at a time of a fundamental change in the economy of media outlets, the early 2000s, and sheds light on the inherent clash between democracies' need to maintain a trustworthy public debate and the capitalistic mechanism of the media. It demonstrates how the neo-liberal turn since the 1970s, together with the emergence of digital technologies had a two-fold effect: it gave rise to the dominance of branding processes in the marketing world, and it disrupted the economic model or legacy media. Both changes opened the way for the introduction of hyper commercialized and intentionally manipulative content.

*Branded Content* serves the needs of both producers and advertisers in a highly fragmented environment and pushes them to work together to create content which is harmful in more than one way. These outputs (in television, film, newspapers, social media and more) are presented to audiences as authentic, organic and trustworthy but in practice present advertising in disguise. In the context of digital platforms, it is often referred to as "native advertising" as the content is presented as "native" to its digital environment. Its inherently serpentine essence poses a real threat to the vital role the media should play in democratic systems: maintaining rational debate and keeping citizens well-informed. According to the author, the most severe damage of this practice is the audiences' growing skepticism and gradual loss of trust in the media, because of the flood of manipulative messages.

The author argues that *Branded Content* should be seen as a new phase of commercialization of media content, that is beyond the traditional and historical notions of "product placement" or "sponsorship". In this phase, brands gain omnipresence in media content: their integration in media content is multi-layered (i.e. touches many different aspects of the content) and runs across platforms (for example, from TV to social media). She defines these two aspects as "deep integration" and "continuous integration". This allows brands to be "everywhere" but at the same time "nowhere". As part of this, sponsors are not looking to "just" place products, but also steer the discussion on shared social values, the conversation on what is "good" and "bad". Balint presents many examples and stories on how brands were intentionally integrated to the programs' format, the design of the set, the comments and advice given by the presenters and the overall premise of the programs.

Hence, Balint argues, commercial sponsorship in the age of branding should be understood as an abstract and fluid phenomenon. Metaphorically speaking, sponsors' money should be thought of as WATER: once corporate funding is poured into media content, it runs all over, making the whole "space" soaked with the brand presence and changes the fundamental form of things in an irreversible manner. This analysis is helpful in understanding the influence of sponsors in other frameworks, not just the media, such as art, public spaces, schools, academia, social media and more.

The book dissects in detail the production process and sponsorship agreements of two successful reality TV shows: the British body-positive makeover program *How to Look Good Naked* (Channel 4, 2006-2010) sponsored by *Dove* (as part of its renowned *Real Beauty* Campaign), and the Israeli financial-coaching program *Overdraft Family* (Channel 2, 2006-2012) sponsored by a leading bank and big retail chain. One of the book's strengths is the empirical data, which is based on field work in the media and advertising industries in both countries and analysis of inside documents. Balint unfolds the details of commercial agreements, brand strategic plans, alongside interviews with key people in the sponsorship-program line to create a new and comprehensive understanding of this old-new funding model.

*Branded Content* boomed just at the time when the genre or Reality TV became a household name in the year 2000 with the success of “Survivor” in the US and “Big Brother” in the UK. The genre became, in those years, an efficient vehicle for commercial agreements with sponsors. Balint points out the strong affinity between branding processes and the genre of Reality. It allows, among other things, a "natural" integration of brands into people's "authentic" behavior and their endorsement by the participants. *Branded Reality* offers a framework to think about more recent phenomena, such as social media influencers.

The book depicts the early stages of the mounting blur between media content and advertising and demonstrated how this trend was used, from the outset, for motivating consumers to further engage with the sponsoring brands and provide personal data in online platforms. In that sense, the analysis is a precursor to the notion of *Surveillance Capitalism* (Zuboff, 2014), the model which is at the heart of social media.

**Synopsis**

**Introduction**

**Chapter 1** **From Product Placement to Branded Content: A Brief History**

The chapter examines the processes, both historical and contemporary, which led to the gradual erosion of the content/advertising distinction, and consequently to the rise of *Branded Content* and ‘native advertising’ since the early 2000s. Balint argues that heightened commercialization of media content in the digital age should be understood as an 'elective affinity' (Weber, 1949; Weber & Kalberg, 2011), i.e. a mutual 'attraction'' and interdependence between content producers and advertisers, in their attempts to maintain access to mass audiences and secure revenues in a highly fragmented media landscape.

**[Chapter 1 Breakdwon](#_Toc445202638)**

[Introduction](#_Toc445202639)

[Content and Commerce: A Historical Accoun](#_Toc445202640)

* [Print Media: ‘Church’, ‘State’ and the Advertorial](#_Toc445202641)
* [American Radio and Television: The Sponsorship Model](#_Toc445202642)
* [The Hollywood Film Industry: Product Placement](#_Toc445202643)
* [The UK: Public Broadcasting on Commercial Television](#_Toc445202644)

[From Cable Television to the Internet: Audience Fragmentation](#_Toc445202645)

* [The First Wave of Fragmentation: The 1980s](#_Toc445202646)
* [The Second Wave of Fragmentation: The Digital Revolution](#_Toc445202647)

[Brands and Broadcasters in the 2000s: Elective Affinities](#_Toc445202648)

* [The Historical Shift of Brands: Every Space is ‘Media’](#_Toc445202649)
* [Content Convergence: From Broadcast to Multiple Platforms](#_Toc445202650)
* [Brands and Media Content: Mutual Attraction](#_Toc445202651)

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**Chapter 2 The Media Between Content and Advertising: A Critical Point of View**

The chapter sets the theoretical framework for critically approaching media commercialization, with special attention given to the most concerning aspect of *Branded Content*: the blurring between editorial content and advertising. While early critical scholars often assumed that the distinction between content and advertising is self-explanatory, professionals in the field of *Branded Content* today would often question if such a distinction exists at all. The chapter therefore aims to fill this gap by approaching a fundamental philosophical question: is media content inherently different from advertising? The analysis dissects the difference between these two acts and presents *Branded Content* as an act of manipulation (Habermas, 1984).

[**Chapter 2 Breakdown**](#_Toc445202638)

[Introduction](#_Toc445202639)

[Content and Commerce: A Historical Account](#_Toc445202640)

* [Print Media: ‘Church’, ‘State’ and the Advertorial](#_Toc445202641)
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* [The First Wave of Fragmentation: The 1980s](#_Toc445202646)
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[Brands and Broadcasters in the 2000s: Elective Affinities](#_Toc445202648)

* [The Historical Shift of Brands: Every Space is ‘Media’](#_Toc445202649)
* [Content Convergence: From Broadcast to Multiple Platforms](#_Toc445202650)
* [Brands and Media Content: Mutual Attraction](#_Toc445202651)

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**Chapter 3** **Formats and Brands: The Story of Two Reality TV Hits and Their Sponsors**

The chapter introduces the story behind the formation of two Reality TV programs and their sponsorship deals. These programs serve as a window to the market of *Branded Content*. The Chapter portrays the conception of these deals as a stage of "falling in love" i.e. ‘elective affinity’, (Howe, 1978) based on the imagined similarities and synergy between the program and its sponsor. Both programs take their participants through a "transformative" journey: the British makeover format *How to Look Good Naked* "trained" middle-aged women to love their bodies to the extent that they would agree to do an artistic nude photo shoot; the Israeli one *Overdraft Family* "trained" families to manage their financials. The British program was sponsored by *Dove* to promote its anti-aging products, as part of its *Real Beauty* campaign; the Israeli one was sponsored by a leading bank and a big retail chain.

[**Chapter 3 Breakdown**](#_Toc445202663)

[Introduction](#_Toc445202664)

[The Case Studies](#_Toc445202665)

[*How to Look Good Naked* and Dove](#_Toc445202666)

* [Dove’s *Real Beauty* Campaign](#_Toc445202667)
* [Channel 4’s *How to Look Good Naked*](#_Toc445202668)
* [The Sponsorship Agreement](#_Toc445202669)

[*Overdraft Family,* Bank Hapo’alim and Shufersal-Deal](#_Toc445202670)

* [Channel 2’s *Overdraft Family*](#_Toc445202671)
* [The Sponsorship Agreement with Bank Hapo’alim](#_Toc445202672)
* [The Sponsorship Agreement with Shufersal-Deal](#_Toc445202673)

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**Chapter 4**  **The Program and the Brand: Deep Integration**

The chapter uncovers the many ways in which brands integrate, in practice, into television programs. It is based on detailed analysis of internal documents, commercial agreements, presentations, interviews and offers an ample of "behind the scenes" stories and visual examples. The core argument is that *Branded Content* deals aim at integrating brands in a "deep" way, such that targets different aspects of the program (e.g. its overall format, visual design and core values) and favors abstract brand representations over just placement of products. The notion of "Deep integration" is the first aspect that marks *Branded Content* as a new phase in commercialization of media content. "Deep integration" allows sponsors to take over the space of the program in a way that is "everywhere" and at the same time "nowhere", due to its abstract nature. This is a result of the dominance of branding processes which shifted the focus of marketing efforts from products to the brand as an image – the perceptions consumers carry in their head. Consequently, for branding professionals "everything is media" (Moor, 2007).

[**Chapter 4 Breakdown**](#_Toc445202675)

[Introduction](#_Toc445202676)

[Diffusion of Messages](#_Toc445202677)

* [*How to Look Good Naked* and Dove](#_Toc445202678)
* [*Overdraft Family,* Bank Hapo’alim and Shufersal-Deal](#_Toc445202679)

[Visual Diffusion](#_Toc445202680)

* [*How to Look Good Naked* and Dove](#_Toc445202681)
* [*Overdraft Family,* Bank Hapo’alim and Shufersal-Deal](#_Toc445202682)

[Product Placement](#_Toc445202683)

* [*How to Look Good Naked* and Dove](#_Toc445202684)
* [*Overdraft Family,* Bank Hapo’alim and Shufersal-Deal](#_Toc445202685)

**Chapter 5**  **From TV to Online: Continuous Integration**

The chapter dissects the ways in which *Branded Content* deals expand beyond television to other platforms such as radio, the press and most importantly – the Internet and mobile devices. In some instances, this collaboration is then maneuvered back to the "real world" through live events which allow audiences to interact "for real" with the experience of the program and its sponsor. This is what Balint defines as "continuous integration" – the cross-platform tendency of these deals - and it is the second aspect which marks *Branded Content* as a new phase of media commercialization. The empirical data demonstrates how the "migration" of the program with its sponsors across platforms creates an intensively commercialized environment in which what seems to be a communicative action (i.e. content) actually becomes more and more strategic, personalized and closely controlled by the brand.

[**Chapter 5 Breakdown**](#_Toc445202687)

[Introduction](#_Toc445202688)

[Television: Between Advertising and Content](#_Toc445202689)

* [Regulation of Sponsorship Credits and Commercial Vignettes in the UK and Israel](#_Toc445202690)
* [Commercial Vignettes](#_Toc445202692)
* [Commercial ‘Shell’ to Programming](#_Toc445202693)

[Across Platforms: Shifting Audiences from Television to Other Platforms](#_Toc445202694)

* [*How to Look Good Naked* and Dove](#_Toc445202695)
* [*Overdraft Family*, Shufersal-Deal and Bank Hapo’alim](#_Toc445202696)
* [Multiple Platforms: A Joint Venture](#_Toc445202697)
* [Internet: Between Advertising and Content](#_Toc445202698)
* [*How to Look Good Naked* and Dove](#_Toc445202699)
* [*Overdraft Family*, Shufersal-Deal and Bank Hapo’alim](#_Toc445202700)

[Summary](#_Toc445202701)

**Chapter 6: Disillusioned: Conflicts, Regulation, Harms to Democracy**

This concluding chapter deals with the harmful implications of *Branded Content*. First, the chapter looks at the tensions that occur between producers and brand representatives during the production process and provides ample examples of conflicts between the content professionals and sponsor's representatives. It is during this stage that the two sides are disillusioned about their "perfect match" and cope with tensions that are related to their inherently different goals. Balint then looks at the efforts of regulators in the UK, Israel and the US to cope with this rising phenomenon and find solutions. It describes a shift from the principle of "separation" to that of "identification", i.e. disclosure. Balint argues that the failure to understand how commercialization works in the digital age leads to inefficient policies.

Finally, the chapter ends with dissecting the damaging aspects of *Branded Content*. *Branded Content* threatens consumers free choice as they are manipulated to believe promotional messages are editorial choices. It threatens freedom of expression as leading corporations gain power over editorial independence. Lastly, *Branded Content* promotes skepticism and suspicion towards the media in general, once consumers become aware of the manipulative nature of some of the messages. It is the gradual loss of trust in the media as a platform for public debate which is the gravest damage caused by *Branded Content*, as trust is at the heart the relationship between the cultural industries and their audience members and is essential for the maintenance of democratic societies.

[**Chapter 6 Breakdown**](#_Toc445202687)

[Introduction](#_Toc445202703)

[A Conflict Zone](#_Toc445202704)

[Regulation of Product Placement, Sponsorship and Native Advertising](#_Toc445202705)

* [American Regulation](#_Toc445202706)
* [European and British Regulation](#_Toc445202707)
* [Israeli Regulation](#_Toc445202708)

[The Case Studies and Regulation of Product Placement and Sponsorship](#_Toc445202709)

[Challenges to Regulation](#_Toc445202710)

[Harms to the Cultural Public Sphere](#_Toc445202711)

[Summary](#_Toc445202712)

**Conclusions**

**Conclusions Breakdown**

[The Core Questions](#_Toc445202714)

[The Market of ‘Branded Content’](#_Toc445202715)

[The Age of Hyper-Hyper Commercialisation](#_Toc445202716)

[Harms to the Cultural Public Sphere](#_Toc445202717)

[A Look Forward](#_Toc445202718)

**Audience and Market**

The book belongs to the field of political economy of the media and looks at the intersection between media, capitalism, democracy and digital technologies. It adds a critical perspective to the growing literature on *Branded Content* and offers a new framework to think about this phenomenon. More broadly, the book contributes to the critical discourse on brands as well as on manipulative content and misinformation and its negative impact on liberal democracies.

The book is relevant to scholars and students in the fields of media studies, business and marketing, sociology, media and entertainment economy and law. At the same time, it is much relevant to policy makers, especially those who deal with regulation of media and social media, as well as practitioners in the field of branding (marketing executives, brand architects, brand consultants, branded content agents) and those involved in the production of content (directors, producers, scriptwriters and so forth). It is also relevant to the wide audience, those who are interested in the critic of capitalism and culture, the dominance of brands as well as reality TV.

The book can be relevant to a number of academic courses such as Marketing Strategies, Branding Practices, Advertising, Entertainment Business, Media Economy, Digital Media, Media Law and Ethics, Political Economy of the Media, Media Policy and Regulation, New Media and Culture, and more.

**Competing Titles**

The interest in *Branded Content* started in the mid-2000s but was dominated at that stage by books which looked at it as a marketing strategy and a new path for brands and entertainment outlets. Two titles from that early period are *Madison & Vine* (Donaton, 2004) and *Branded Entertainment* (Lehu, 2007). These were later followed by trade books that focused mainly on Native Advertising (for example: Keast, 2016; Lovell, 2017; Smith, 2017)

A critical perspective on *Branded Content* is a relatively recent development. Mara Einstein's *Black Ops Advertising* (2016) provides a broad description of the overall blur between marketing and editorial content in the digital age, with an emphasis on native advertising (advertising pretending to be content on digital platforms) and content marketing (marketers becoming publishers). Einstein's background as a marketing executive is a strength in diving into the changes in this world. However, the book mainly follows the trends in the market and, although taking a critical perspective, does not excel in dissecting the harm to society and democracy. Another short book on Native Advertising (Lynch, 2018) focused on the disruption in new rooms. Jonathan Hardy's *Branded Content*: T*he Fateful Merging of Media and Marketing* (2022)is a thorough introduction to this phenomenon. Hardy, a scholar in political economy of the media and a colleague, provides a broad overview of the practices, policies and problems that are typical to the changes between marketing and media in the digital age.

The current book takes this conversation forward. First, it offers a theoretical framework to understand the inherent difference between advertising and content, a difference which is often denied by those who are involved in those deceptive practices. Second, the book dives into the reality of this market – the nits and grits of how things work in practice, with some fantastic stories on the tensions behind the scenes. Third, the book presents a comprehensive story of two Reality shows and, in that way, provides an intriguing experience for readers, a window to how the cultural industries 'really' work. Most importantly, the book provides a new framework to think about commercialization of content in the digital age and the presence of brands in public spaces. This perspective, which defines *Branded Content* as an abstract and fluid phenomenon which is "everywhere" and at the same time "nowhere" and a form of pollution of public discourse, goes beyond marketing jargons and previous scholarly analysis and allows readers to look at the reality around then with a new perspective.

**Format and Timeline**

The manuscript is 95,000 words (including footnotes, references and appendixes) and can be ready for publication by the end of 2024**.**

A new chapter on Social Media influencers can be ready by February 2025.

The manuscript includes 35 images taken from TV episodes, websites, presentations and ads.

The manuscript includes material from interviews, presentations and other documents. The documents were given by interviewees who were involved in their creation.

**About the Author**

Dr. Anat Balint is the Jeffrey B. Plevan Chair in Modern Israel Studies at the *University of Arizona*. She is a media scholar and a former journalist. Balint was the media correspondent at *Ha'aretz* daily newspaper and part of the staff of the *Seventh Ey*e media watchdog in Israel. She covered the media industry in the country for many years and followed closely the rise of *Branded Content* in the early 2000s. She published a book about this market in Israel (*Inside the Box*, 2016, Israeli Democracy Institute, in Hebrew). This book proposal is based on her PhD dissertation, supervised by Prof. Nick Couldry and Dr. Liz Moor, written in the department for Media, Communications and Culture Studies at Goldsmiths College, University of London.

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Weber, M., & Kalberg, S. (2011). *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. Oxford University Press.

1. To clarify the terms as I use them here, **content marketing** is about how brands use storytelling and content generation for their marketing purposes, while **branded content** is about brand integration into editorial content created in traditional media. As social media has developed, the line between these terms has blurred, as legacy media outlets, brands, and users are present on all these platforms and can interact and coordinate. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)