



Still Not the News

Stations Overwhelmingly Fail to Disclose VNRs

**A follow-up multimedia report on television newsrooms'
continuing use of fake news provided by PR firms**

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News Release

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New Investigation Catches More TV Stations Airing Fake News

‘Still Not the News’ report names 46 stations airing VNRs, including 10 already under FCC investigation

WASHINGTON — The Center for Media and Democracy (CMD) and Free Press today unveiled evidence that television stations continue to insert corporate-funded PR videos into their newscasts without proper disclosure.

A new CMD report, titled “Still Not the News: Stations Overwhelmingly Fail to Disclose VNRs,” documents 46 TV stations that aired corporate video news releases, or VNRs—sponsored segments produced to mimic independent news reports.

The full report, including video footage of the VNRs and the TV newscasts that incorporated them, is now online at www.stopfakenews.org

“Our new report shows that news audiences continue to be deceived by fake TV news,” said Diane Farsetta, CMD senior researcher and co-author of the report. “Of the 54 VNR broadcasts that we documented, only two offered clear disclosure of the client behind the segment. Nearly 90 percent of the time, TV stations made no effort to disclose at all.”

FCC Commissioners Michael Copps and Jonathan S. Adelstein will join the two groups in a phone press conference announcing the report today.

“Still Not the News” is a follow-up to CMD’s April 2006 report, “Fake TV News: Widespread and Undisclosed.” The earlier report named 77 TV stations that had aired VNRs. Not once were the sponsors of the segments disclosed to news audiences.

In August, the FCC launched an investigation into VNR usage, sending letters of inquiry to the owners of all 77 stations. Recently, the Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA) urged the FCC to halt its investigation. And a new consortium of broadcast PR firms, the National Association of Broadcast Communicators, is promoting industry self-regulation. Yet at least eight of the stations already under investigation by the FCC aired VNRs in the past six months without disclosure, according to the new report.

“Not only should the FCC investigation continue, another one should be launched to address the incidents documented in our new report,” said Daniel Price, CMD research consultant and co-author of the report. “Television stations and industry groups have proven incapable of addressing the issue themselves.”

The new report documents news broadcasts of VNRs from major corporations, such as General Motors, GlaxoSmithKline, Allstate Insurance and Novartis. One VNR, funded by a lobbying firm that represents ExxonMobil, claimed that there is no link between global warming and more severe hurricane activity.

More than 80 percent of the stations snared in CMD’s research are owned by large media conglomerates - including stations owned by News Corp., Tribune, Gannett, Disney, the Washington Post Co., Sinclair Broadcasting, Media General and Univision.

“The evidence suggests a strong tie between media consolidation and the use of deceptive, pre-packaged propaganda,” said Timothy Karr, campaign director of Free Press, which organized an activism campaign that has generated tens of thousands of letters to the FCC protesting fake news. “Corporate PR firms offer local stations VNRs knowing there’s a built-in incentive to use them. By dressing up fake news as local reporting, stations cut costs. But viewers have no way to know they’re being duped.”

Free Press and CMD also will file a formal complaint with the FCC, asking the agency to expand its ongoing investigation into undisclosed VNRs. The groups urged the agency to clarify disclosure requirements and penalize all stations that air fake news.

For more information, see www.stopfakenews.org or www.freepress.net/fakenews

The Center for Media and Democracy (www.prwatch.org) is a nonprofit, public interest organization that strengthens participatory democracy by investigating and exposing public relations spin and propaganda, and by promoting media literacy and citizen journalism.

Free Press (www.freepress.net) is a national, nonpartisan organization that seeks to increase informed public participation in media policy and to promote a more competitive and democratic media system.



Executive Summary

This report includes:

- Video footage of 33 video news releases (VNRs), plus the television news segments that incorporated them (available online at <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/findings/vnrs>);
- A list of the 46 television stations, by state (page 64); and
- Sections on frequently asked questions about VNR disclosure and policy issues (page 68), and on research methodology (p 66).

In Brief

The ongoing controversy over video news releases has not stopped television stations from airing the fake news segments without attribution. Over six months, the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD) documented 46 stations in 22 states airing at least one VNR in their newscast. Of the 54 total VNR broadcasts described in this report, 48 provided no disclosure of the nature or source of the sponsored video. In the six other cases, disclosure was fleeting and often ambiguous. Ten of the TV stations named in this study were also cited in CMD's April 2006 "Fake TV News" report,¹ for undisclosed VNR broadcasts. These findings suggest that station and industry codes of conduct—not to mention an ongoing investigation by the Federal Communications Commission—are not sufficient to ensure the public's right to know who seeks to persuade them via television news, the most widely used information source in the United States.

Highlights

Report highlights include:

- WTOK-11 in Meridian, MS, aired without disclosure a VNR titled, "Global Warming: Hot Air?" (page 9). The segment ridiculed claims that increased hurricane activity is related to global warming. The VNR was funded by TCS Daily, a website then published by the PR and lobbying firm DCI Group², which counts ExxonMobil among its clients.
- In 12 instances, television stations actively denied disclosure to their news audiences by editing out on-screen and verbal client notifications included in the original VNRs. WMGM-40 in Philadelphia aired a full-length VNR after making just one edit—to remove the on-screen disclosure (page 13). A WMGM-40 reporter re-voiced the VNR, following the original script nearly verbatim, but omitting the verbal disclosure at the end of the script.
- In four instances, television stations not only aired VNRs without disclosure, but showed PR publicists on screen, as though they were staff reporters. KHON-2 (Honolulu, HI) and KFMB-8 (San Diego, CA) allowed publicist Mike Morris to "report" on Halloween traditions (and promote his client, General Mills—see page 15), while KVCT-19 (Victoria, TX) and KSFY-13 (Sioux Falls, SD) showed publicist Kate Brookes "reporting" on medical advancements (specifically, machinery produced by her client, Siemens—see pages 17 and 25).

- Ten television stations named in this study had previously been cited in the April 2006 “Fake TV News” report for undisclosed VNR broadcasts, including such major market stations as New York City’s NY1 (page 23) and WPIX-11 (page 56), WDAF-4 in Kansas City, MO (page 43), and WSYX-6 in Columbus, OH (page 48). Only two of the 10 stations previously cited—Philadelphia’s KYW-3 (page 44) and Cincinnati’s WCPO-9 (page 35)—provided disclosure of their more recent VNR broadcasts.

Background

Video news releases are pre-packaged broadcast segments designed to look like television news stories, that are funded by and scripted for corporate or government clients. On April 6, 2006, the Center for Media and Democracy released a comprehensive report detailing TV newsrooms’ use of VNRs. The report, “Fake TV News: Widespread and Undisclosed,” named 77 TV stations that aired at least one of 36 VNRs tracked over a ten-month period. Not once were the clients behind the segments—such as Pfizer, Intel and General Motors—disclosed to news audiences.

The response to CMD’s report was significant. In August 2006, the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) launched an investigation of the 77 stations named.³ According to the FCC’s April 2005 Public Notice, TV stations airing VNRs “must clearly disclose to members of their audiences the nature, source and sponsorship of the material.”⁴

CMD continued to track VNRs following the release of the “Fake TV News” report. Knowing that previous public scrutiny had resulted in little change in the production or use of VNRs (see “The Professional Opposition” section of “Fake TV News: Recommendations”),⁵ CMD sought to determine whether the broadcast PR firms that create VNRs and/or the TV newsrooms that air them were changing their practices. The results are especially interesting, in light of a coordinated industry attack⁶ on CMD’s initial report and allegations that the report and resulting FCC investigation have had “a chilling effect” on TV newsrooms.⁷ (See “Frequently Asked Questions,” page 68.)

Summary

The Center for Media and Democracy’s follow-up research indicates that viewers are still routinely deceived by fake TV news. From April through October 2006, CMD documented 46 stations in 22 states airing at least one of 33 different video news releases. (See “Methodology,” page 66) The total number of VNRs tracked for this study—109—represents just two percent of the estimated 5,000 VNRs offered to U.S. television newsrooms over a six-month period.

Eighty-nine percent of the VNR broadcasts documented—48 of the 54 examples in this report—included no disclosure whatsoever of the nature or source of the sponsored video. The six remaining VNR broadcasts exhibited different approaches to disclosure. However, none approached the level recommended by CMD: continuous on-screen notification of the client that funded the VNR.

The strongest level of disclosure observed in this report was provided by KSFY-13 in Sioux Falls, SD, though it can hardly be attributed to the station’s initiative (page 23). KSFY-13 aired a complete and uncut VNR from the broadcast PR firm D S Simon Productions, complete with narration by publicist Sonia Martin. At the end of both the VNR and the KSFY-13 segment, the words “Video provided by American College of Physicians, publisher of *Annals of Internal Medicine*” briefly flashed on the screen and Martin signed off, “On behalf of the American College of Physicians, I’m Sonia Martin.”

This built-in client notification appears to be a new practice at D S Simon, likely in reaction to CMD's "Fake TV News" report. While a step in the right direction, most stations airing D S Simon VNRs deleted the notifications from their newscast, thus actively denying disclosure to their news audiences. CMD documented 15 newscasts that included footage from D S Simon VNRs with built-in client identification; 12 of the 15 failed to provide any disclosure to audiences. It's hard to imagine how this could be due to simple human error, as many stations claimed following the release of the "Fake TV News" report.⁸

Questionable approaches to disclosure seen include fleeting and/or ambiguous on-screen labels. Such marginal attempts, coupled with the variety of approaches used, suggest that the FCC needs to clarify what constitutes the requisite "clear" disclosure of a VNR's "nature, source and sponsorship," as stated in the agency's April 2005 Public Notice. The FCC should also work, in concert with TV stations and broadcast PR firms, to ensure that minimum standard is met in practice.

There were more subtle changes in TV newsrooms' use of VNRs, compared to what CMD documented in April's "Fake TV News" report. Stations cited here were more likely to edit VNRs, as opposed to running them in their entirety. Eighty-five percent of VNR broadcasts contained edited footage, versus 64 percent in the earlier report. Stations cited here were also more likely to have local staff re-voice the publicist's original VNR narration. Eighty-five percent of VNR broadcasts had been re-voiced, versus 61 percent in the earlier report. Lastly, stations cited here were more likely to supplement the VNR material with other video. Twenty-two percent of segments included outside video, versus 13 percent in the earlier report. However, in one case, the additional video appears to have come from other VNRs. Other segments included what looks like promotional video or generic background footage.

In sum, television newscasts—the most popular news source in the United States—continue to air VNRs. Overwhelmingly, stations fail to offer any disclosure of the nature or source of the sponsored video. When TV stations do make some attempt at disclosure, it is fleeting and often ambiguous. Broadcast PR firms and TV stations appear to have done little to constructively address the serious problems documented in the "Fake TV News" report, even following the August 2006 launch of the ongoing FCC investigation into undisclosed VNRs.

Reference Links

1. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/execsummary>
2. http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=DCI_Group
3. <http://www.prwatch.org/node/5084>
4. http://hraunfoss.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/FCC-05-84A1.pdf
5. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/recommendations>
6. <http://www.prwatch.org/node/5304>
7. http://rtnda.org/foi/vnr_filling.pdf
8. <http://www.prwatch.org/node/4762>



Findings—Video News Releases

From April to October 2006, the Center for Media and Democracy documented television newsrooms' use of selected video news releases (VNRs). While the number of VNRs tracked equals roughly two percent of the total offered to newsrooms over the six-month period, this report provides a detailed and representative survey of how VNRs are incorporated into newscasts.

This section contains detailed information about each VNR, including the client that funded it, the TV stations that aired it, and the techniques that each station used to incorporate the VNR into its newscast. At the end of each article is a web address at which you can view Quicktime videos of the original VNRs as well as selected newscasts that incorporated them.

Oil Lobbyist's "News" Denies Inconvenient Truths

WTOK-11's Hot Air Misleads Viewers

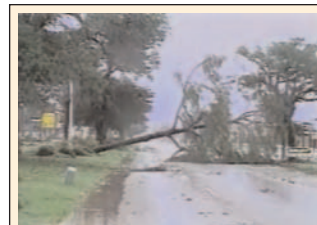
There is no doubt that global warming is a real phenomenon, largely caused by human activities—although the oil industry would have you believe otherwise. Much like the tobacco industry—whose campaign to deny the health dangers of smoking can be summed up by an infamous internal memo¹ stating “doubt is our product”—the oil industry funds scientists, think tanks and organizations who dutifully challenge the large, varied and growing base of evidence of climate change.² These unassailable truths might have led Big Oil to fake news.

In June 2006, the broadcast PR firm Medialink Worldwide put out a video news release (VNR) titled, “Global Warming and Hurricanes: All Hot Air.” In accompanying materials, the firm identified “TCS Daily Science Roundtable” as the client behind the segment. But Medialink didn't disclose that TCS Daily is a website published by Tech Central Station and was, at the time, a project of the Republican lobbying and PR firm DCI Group. (In October 2006, DCI sold the TCS Daily website.) Or that DCI Group counts among its clients ExxonMobil. Or that ExxonMobil gave the Tech Central Science Foundation \$95,000 in 2003, for “climate change support.”³

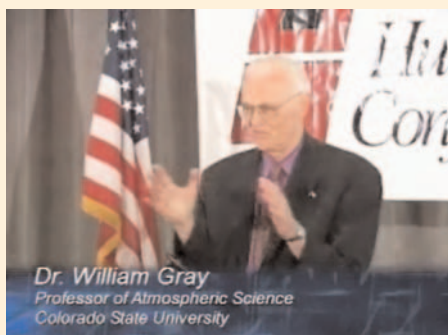
The VNR features Dr. William Gray and Dr. James J. O'Brien, who are identified as “two of the nation's top weather and ocean scientists.” Gray denies that there's any link between global warming and the severity of recent hurricane seasons. “We don't think that's the case,” he says. “This is the way nature sometimes works.” The VNR attributes increased hurricane activity to “the cycle of nature.”

In reality, the link between climate change and hurricane severity not been disproved. “No one doubts that since the early 1990s storms have increased in their intensity and no one doubts that average sea temperatures have increased slightly over the past 30 years,” explained Andrew Buncombe in an August 2006 article for *The Independent*.⁴ “Whether there is a link between these two phenomena remains unanswered.”

Peer-reviewed scientific studies on the issue have reached conflicting conclusions, though an in-depth analysis reported in September 2006 found “a large human influence” on rising sea-surface temperatures, which lead to stronger hurricanes.⁵ The same month, *Nature* magazine reported on a position paper from federal scientists that linked intensified hurricanes to global warming; the document was reportedly quashed by the Bush administration.⁶



Client: TCS Daily
Released: May 2006
Aired By: 1 station
Disclosed By: No stations



Original TCS Daily VNR
Created by Medialink
Voiced by publicist



WTOK-11 10PM newscast
May 31, 2006
Re-voiced by station anchor

Quicktime video for the TCS Daily VNR and the WTOK-11 newscast can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr40>

Oil Lobbyist's "News" Denies Inconvenient Truths (cont'd)

The TCS Daily VNR is correct in identifying Drs. Gray and O'Brien as meteorologists with extensive experience predicting hurricanes. However, Gray appears to have an ideological axe to grind with regard to climate change. In June 2006, he told the *Denver Post* that global warming is a "hoax," something that "they've been brainwashing us [about] for 20 years."⁷

O'Brien has a history of associating himself with corporate-funded climate change skeptics. He's on Tech Central Station's "Science Roundtable"⁸ and is also listed as an expert at the George C. Marshall Institute.⁹ In 2004, the Institute received \$170,000 from ExxonMobil, for "climate change activities."¹⁰

Sadly, none of these affiliations, caveats or complexities were communicated when WTOK-11 (Meridian, MS) aired as "news" an edited and re-voiced version of the TCS Daily VNR, on May 31, 2006.

WTOK-11 anchor Tom Daniels introduced the segment by saying, "Hurricane seasons for the next 20 years could be severe. But don't blame global warming." Viewers were not told that what followed was nothing but hot air, paid by and scripted for oil company lobbyists.

In August 2006, DCI Group was linked to a short "amateur" parody¹¹ posted on a popular video-sharing website. The clip belittled the threat from global warming and ridiculed Al Gore's climate change documentary "An Inconvenient Truth." *Wall Street Journal* reporters Antonio Regalado and Dionne Searcey noted that "through Tech Central Station ... DCI has sought to raise doubts about the science of global warming and about Mr. Gore's film, placing skeptical scientists on talk-radio shows and paying them to write editorials."¹²

Thanks to WTOK-11, the disinformation campaign also reached TV news audiences.

Reference Links

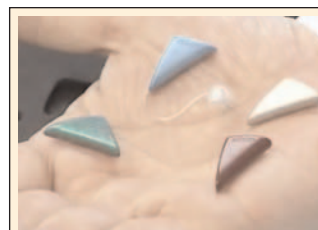
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10. <http://www.exxonsecrets.org/html/orgfactsheet.php?id=36>
11. <http://youtube.com/watch?v=IZSqXUSwHRI&search=gore%20and%20penguin>
12. http://online.wsj.com/article/SB115457177198425388.html?mod=hps_us_editors_picks

Huey Lewis and the Fake News

Four Stations Remove Built-In Disclosures on Hearing Aid VNR

In April 2006, D S Simon Productions created a video news release (VNR) promoting Delta, a new hearing aid receiver from Oticon A/S. The two-minute video, titled “It’s Not Your Grandfather’s Hearing Aid,” features product praise from 1980s rock sensation Huey Lewis, as well as Phil Christensen, a professional audiologist.

The VNR also contains two new forms of client identification that were presumably added in response to the Center for Media and Democracy’s (CMD’s) report “Fake TV News: Widespread and Undisclosed,” which had been released three weeks earlier. D S Simon added a brief visual overlay at the end of the video that clearly indicated Oticon as the VNR’s sponsor. Additionally, the company changed its narrating publicist’s sign-off from “I’m Sonia Martin” to “On behalf of Oticon, I’m Sonia Martin.”



Client: Oticon A/S
Released: April 2006
Aired By: 4 stations
Disclosed By: No stations

Despite D S Simon’s laudable efforts to ensure transparency, four television stations took active measures to strip all disclosure from the VNR before blending it into their newscasts. On April 27, KXXV-25 (Waco, TX) passed the story off as their own “Healthbeat” segment, enlisting station reporter Sonia Azad to re-narrate the story virtually word-for-word.



Original Oticon VNR

Created by D S Simon Productions
Voiced by publicist



KCOP-13 11PM newscast

April 27, 2006
Re-voiced by station reporter



WLVI-56 10PM newscast

April 26, 2006
Re-voiced by station reporter



KMEG-14 10PM newscast

April 26, 2006
Re-voiced by station reporter

Quicktime video for the Oticon VNR and the newscasts for KCOP-13, WLVI-56 and KMEG-14 can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr37>

Similarly, and on the same day, KMEG-14 (Sioux City, IA) recruited its own health correspondent, Natalie DeGezelle, to follow Sonia Martin's script nearly verbatim.

Meanwhile, two major-market stations—WLVI-56 (Boston, MA) and KCOP-13 (Los Angeles, CA)—provided their own edited versions of the Oticon VNR, on April 26 and 27, respectively. Both segments were re-voiced by station reporters, and were built entirely from the VNR and supplementary footage (also known as B-roll) provided by D S Simon. KCOP-13 even referred viewers to the Oticon website for more sales information.

None of the four stations balanced the VNR footage with independent research, and none disclosed D S Simon or Oticon as the source of their story. This fits the overall pattern observed by CMD—of the 15 newscasts that included footage from D S Simon VNRs with built-in client identification, 12 failed to provide any of that disclosure to viewers.

All four offending newscasts aired just three weeks after the Radio-Television News Directors Association—in response to CMD's report—publicly urged its members to strengthen their VNR disclosure policies.¹ Five months later, KCOP-13 aired another VNR, from Novartis, without disclosure (page 48).

Reference Links

1. <http://rtnda.org/news/2006/040606.shtml>

Feed a Cold, Starve the Truth

Two Stations Sneeze at Built-In VNR Notifications

Sometimes you have to wonder why the broadcast public relations firm D S Simon Productions even bothers. Following the April 2006 release of the “Fake TV News” report, the firm added client notifications to most of its video news releases (VNRs). As is described elsewhere, these VNRs end with brief on-screen written and verbal mentions of the client that funded the segment.

However, television newscasts incorporating these VNRs—12 of 15 cited in this study, to be exact—overwhelmingly failed to provide any disclosure to viewers. WMGM-40 (Linwood, NJ) is one station that edited out the D S Simon notifications, thus actively denying disclosure to its news audience.

On October 18, 2006, WMGM-40 health reporter Robin Stoloff opened her “Lifeline” segment by saying, “A national survey by Harris Interactive shows only nine percent of travelers over the age of 30 say that they feel knowledgeable about how to treat the common cold.”

What followed was a pre-packaged VNR that D S Simon had produced for Matrixx Initiatives, the makers of Zicam cold remedies. The segment contained multiple mentions and product shots of Zicam. The *only edit* that WMGM-40 made was to remove the on-screen client notification at the end of the VNR. Stoloff had re-voiced the segment, following the original VNR script¹ nearly word-for-word, with a few minor stylistic variations. However, she neglected to say the five most important words in the script: “On behalf of Matrixx Initiatives.”

WMGM-40 denied disclosure not only to Philadelphia-area viewers, but also to website visitors. The online version of Stoloff’s story² contains no indication that it was copied from Matrixx Initiatives’ PR materials. An additional online report³ about foot bunyons, dated October 11, was copied word-for-word from a VNR created by Gordon Productions on behalf of the American College of Foot and Ankle Surgeons.⁴ Once again, no disclosure was given.

According to WMGM-40 news director Harvey Cox, it is against the news department’s policy to air VNRs. He explained that Stoloff “is not a news employee, she is a sales person who doubles as a health reporter [and] does a sponsored segment.”

On October 16, KSFY-13 (Sioux Falls, SD) anchor Allen Sommerfeld introduced an edited version of the Matrixx Initiatives



Client: Matrixx Initiatives
Released: October 2006
Aired By: 2 stations
Disclosed By: No stations



Original Matrixx Initiatives VNR
Created by D S Simon Productions
Voiced by publicist



WMGM-40 6PM newscast
October 18, 2006
Re-voiced by station health reporter



KSFY-13 5:30AM newscast
October 16, 2006
Re-voiced by station anchor

Quicktime video for the Matrixx Initiatives VNR and the newscasts for WMGM-40 and KSFY-13 can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr68>

VNR that he had re-voiced. Although every shot and piece of information in the segment came from the VNR, no disclosure was made to the KSFY-13 news audience.

KSFY-13 had previously aired two other health-related VNRs. On August 16, 2006, the station ran a complete VNR from the American College of Physicians (page 23), that time airing the built-in client notifications. Two days later, KSFY-13 aired an entire Siemens VNR, without any disclosure (page 17). The “Fake TV News” report included another Matrixx Initiatives VNR that was aired by one station, again without disclosure.⁵

Reference Links

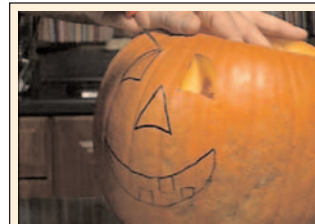
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5. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/vnr19>

Mike Morris Gets His Big Break

Two Stations Dress Publicist Up as Reporter for Halloween

Unlike other broadcast public relations firms, Medialink Worldwide has no qualms about having its publicists play on-screen reporters in its video news releases (VNRs). And many television newscasts have gone along for the ride, showing Medialink's Kate Brookes "reporting" from ethanol plants,¹ driver's seats,² hospitals (page 17), and other hospitals (page 25). But while Brookes' colleague Mike Morris also appears in VNRs, TV stations rarely included him in the picture—until October 2006.

That month, Medialink produced a Halloween-themed VNR for General Mills titled, "History of the Jack O' Lantern." In addition to numerous shots of pumpkins and pumpkin-flavored treats, the spot features soundbites from Betty Crocker's Maggie Gilbert, woman-on-the-street interviews, and screenshots of the Betty Crocker website. At the end of the VNR, Mike Morris says, "Now, once you've carved your Jack O' Lantern, log onto BettyCrocker.com to get recipes and ideas."



Client: General Mills
Released: October 2006
Aired By: 2 stations
Disclosed By: No stations



Medialink's Morris, falsely identified as a reporter by KHON-2

On October 24, KHON-2 (Honolulu, HI) aired the VNR, complete and uncut. Worse, when Medialink's Morris appeared on screen, the station added a text overlay that read, "Mike Morris reporting." Honolulu viewers were not told that the segment had been cooked up by Betty Crocker's PR firm and paid for by General Mills.

Such poor journalistic practices were presaged in early 2006, when KHON-2 changed hands and its new owners announced plans to fire nearly one-third of the station's employees. News anchor Joe Moore, who later resigned in protest, told the *Honolulu Advertiser* at the time, "It's clear to almost everyone at the station that our new owners are destroying KHON. ... Their barbaric downsizing plan will severely cripple our ability to present relevant news and public service programming."³ [Update: Moore later decided to stay at the station.]⁴

On October 24, KFMB-8 (San Diego, CA) also aired the entire pre-packaged General Mills VNR. KFMB-8 anchor Nichelle



Original General Mills VNR
Created by Medialink
Reported by Mike Morris



KHON-2 6AM newscast
October 24, 2006
Reported by Mike Morris



KFMB-8 5:30AM newscast
October 24, 2006
Reported by Mike Morris

Quicktime video for the General Mills VNR and the newscasts for KHON-2 and KFMB-8 can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr67>

Mike Morris Gets His Big Break (cont'd)

Medina introduced the segment by asking, “Have you ever wondered where the tradition of turning a plain old pumpkin into a grinning Jack O’ Lantern comes from? Mike Morris has the scoop on exactly who Jack is.”

San Diego viewers were tricked that morning. Like KHON-2, KFMB-8 failed to treat its news audience to any disclosure of the sponsored nature of the segment.

KFMB-8 received the VNR from a CBS video feed, according to station news director Fred D’Ambrosi. “The piece was clearly identified as a VNR on the feed, but the producer did not see the VNR slate and assumed it was a feature story,” he explained. Station policy is not to use VNRs in news stories, and “our staff has been reminded” of that, he added.

Reference Links

1. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/vnr16>
2. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/vnr23>
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Doctored News

Publicist Delivers “Health Report” at Two Newscasts

For the second time, KSFY-13 (Sioux Falls, SD) took a video news release (VNR) from medical industry publicists and dropped it—complete and uncut—into their morning newscast. Unlike the earlier instance documented in this report (page 23), KSFY-13 completely failed this time to disclose the true source of the story to its viewers.

On August 22, 2006, the station aired a two-minute health report on MVision, an elaborate new medical device from Siemens Oncology that provides doctors with a three-dimensional image of a patient’s tumor, thus allowing them to treat the cancer with more accurate radiation therapy. The story featured numerous all-positive soundbites from Frederick Linder, a prostate cancer patient; Dr. Jean Pouliot, an oncologist at a San Francisco cancer center; and Andreas Schlatter, a representative from Siemens Oncology. The “reporter,” Kate Brookes, closed the segment by calling MVision “a development that has the potential to revolutionize the way we treat cancer.”



Client: Siemens Oncology
Released: August 2006
Aired By: 2 stations
Disclosed By: No stations



Medialink’s Brookes, falsely identified as a reporter by KSFY-13

Sadly, KSFY-13’s audience had no way of knowing that the entire health report was lifted frame-by-frame from a VNR created by Medialink Worldwide on behalf of its client, Siemens Oncology. Nor could viewers tell that Kate Brookes was actually a publicist, not a journalist. In introducing the story, KSFY-13 morning anchor Meagan Dorsch tossed to the story to Brookes as if she were a reporter at the station: “As Kate Brookes explains, recent advances are helping doctors treat tumors faster, safer, and more precisely.”

In addressing his station’s use of VNRs, KSFY-13 news director Mitch Krebs told the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD) that “we like to run disclosure...but sometimes a producer might not understand the rules.”

On August 28, the Siemens VNR made a brief appearance on “First Business”, a nationally-syndicated financial news program that appears early mornings on 191 stations across the United States. The 30-second segment, presented by Medialink’s Brookes, contained narrative material not available in the original VNR. It’s not known if the content was



Original Siemens VNR
Created by Medialink
Reported by Kate Brookes



KSFY-13 5:30 AM newscast
August 22, 2006
Reported by Kate Brookes

Quicktime video for the Siemens VNR and the KSFY-13 newscast can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr50>

gathered from supplementary footage (B-roll) provided with the VNR or if it was specially-prepared by Medialink for use on “First Business.”

CMD has observed Kate Brookes “reporting” for Medialink and Siemens on multiple occasions. In January 2006, she presented a pro-ethanol story¹ on behalf of Siemens AG, which supplies processing systems to two-thirds of America’s ethanol plants. Five stations used the complete VNR without any disclosure. Later that month, she was featured in a VNR on modular car components² manufactured by Siemens’ automobile division. It was used without attribution by three stations.

Six days before KSFY-13 ran the Siemens VNR, the station had aired a report on a new diagnostic tool for kidney disease that was taken whole-cloth from a privately-funded VNR (page 23). In that instance, disclosure was only provided because the VNR’s creator—D S Simon Productions—had recently updated their procedures to embed the client information in the VNR itself. Two months later, KSFY-13 aired yet another undisclosed VNR, promoting a cold remedy (page 13).

Reference Links

1. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/vnr16>
2. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/vnr23>

Would You Buy a Car From This Man?

KMSP-9 Helps Rev Up Convertible Sales

Bob Lutz looks like an automobile salesman. His sunglasses are dark and his suit is light. As he talks, his gravelly voice booms and his arms wave about, involving his surroundings in the conversation.

Perhaps it's because Lutz has worked in the automobile industry for decades. He currently heads product development at General Motors (GM). That can't be an easy job. The auto maker lost \$10.6 billion in 2005 and is facing a "deteriorating market share in its North American market," reported the *Wall Street Journal* in July 2006.¹

Yet, the previous month, KMSP-9 (Minneapolis / St. Paul, MN) painted a rosy picture of GM's prospects. In its June 19 newscast, the station reported that GM could barely keep up with consumer demand. "The Solstice is sold out. The Sky is sold out. The Pontiac G-6 convertible is sold out," a gesticulating Lutz told KMSP-9.

The reason for the upbeat tone of the TV report? KMSP-9 was airing a video news release (VNR) produced for GM by the PR firm Medialink Worldwide.

The VNR also featured Jean Jennings from *Automobile* magazine. "I have seen, as many journalists have, cars that are scheduled for the next couple of years," she said. "And I'll tell you, if those cars were on the road right now today, I don't think they'd [GM would] be in this jam at all."

The KMSP-9 story was a frame-for-frame match of the original VNR, retaining Medialink publicist Andrew Schmertz's narration. While introducing the segment, KMSP-9 anchor Karen Scullin added some European flair to his name: "Even though some makes and models of cars are actually seeing a purchase slow-down, André Schmertz finds out why that's not the case with the open-air rides."

Sacré bleu! Twin Cities viewers were not told that what followed was faux news, manufactured for GM.

According to KMSP-9 news director Bill Dallman, station policy is that VNRs can only be aired if "specifically approved



Client: General Motors
Released: June 2006
Aired By: 1 station
Disclosed By: No stations



Original General Motors VNR

Created by Medialink
Voiced by publicist



KMSP-9 9PM news segment

June 19, 2006
Voiced by publicist

Quicktime video for the General Motors VNR and the KSMP-9 newscast can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr41>

Would You Buy a Car From This Man? (cont'd)

by a news manager, and then only if that information is available no other way.” The policy also states that VNRs should be labeled and verbally disclosed.

Dallman added, “The damage only comes, in my opinion, if you’re talking about ... a person presenting a point of view that’s clearly designed to forward the product that they’re pushing.” Which sounds a lot like Bob Lutz.

Reference Links

1. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB115254342662702341-search.html?KEYWORDS=general+motors&COLLECTION=wsjie/6month>

“Life Insurance Is Like Money in the Bank!”

Allstate in Good Hands with VNR-Friendly News Team

The days of the traveling insurance salesman are long gone, thanks to mass-market advertising. After all, why go door-to-door when you can enter thousands of homes at once through the television screen? Of course, in this ad-saturated culture, even a deep-voiced, authoritarian spokesman like actor Dennis Haysbert might not be enough to sell Allstate policies.

That may be why the company hired the broadcast PR firm Medialink Worldwide to create a video news release (VNR) about the importance of having life insurance, and lots of it.

The segment begins with the happy image of a mother pushing her two young children on swings, and then quickly turns ominous. “According to a study cited by the Insurance Information Institute,” says Medialink publicist Andrew Schmertz, “two-fifths of surviving spouses would currently suffer between a 20 and 40 percent reduction in their standard of living if the primary wage-earner in the family died.”

“So do you have life insurance?” inquired Schmertz. “And if so, do you have enough?”

CN8, the regional cable network owned by Comcast, was all too willing to ask those questions on Schmertz’s behalf. On September 26, 2006, the channel’s signature newscast—“Art Fennell Reports”—aired an 82-second edit of the VNR, replacing Schmertz’s narration with the more familiar voice of consumer reporter Janet Zappala, and retaining both soundbites from Allstate manager Diego Hernandez as he sits in front of the company’s “good hands” logo.

Additionally, CN8 mistakenly attributed the VNR’s one statistical figure to the Insurance Information Institute, rather than a study that was cited by the Institute. It’s unknown if anyone CN8 made an own attempt to verify the statistic contained in the VNR.

But the station, through Zappala, had no trouble telling its viewers that “life insurance is like money in the bank. And like a retirement account, the equity can grow and can be used to pay for almost anything; funeral expenses, debts, or to maintain a certain standard of living.” Unbeknownst to audiences at home, the entire sentence was lifted verbatim from the VNR announcement furnished by Medialink.¹



Client: Allstate
Released: September 2006
Aired By: 1 station
Disclosed By: No stations



Original Allstate VNR
Created by Medialink
Voiced by publicist



CN8 10PM newscast
September 26, 2006
Re-voiced by station reporter

Quicktime video for the Allstate VNR and the CN8 newscast can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr60>

Neither CN8 or Zappala gave any indication to viewers that their entire news story was supplied by publicists on behalf of Allstate.

But what's bad news for TV audiences is great news for Allstate. Perhaps the days of the deep-voiced, authoritarian spokesman are coming to an end, thanks to newscasts like "Art Fennell Reports." After all, why pay actors when you can get a TV news reporter to sell your policies for free?

CN8 also aired two unlabeled VNRs from General Mills; one for Wheaties (page 61) and one for Bisquick (page 46), as well as undisclosed VNRs for Trend Micro (page 29) and Nelson's Rescue Sleep (page 59). Additionally, the Center for Media and Democracy tracked two other VNRs from Allstate and Medialink for this study: one on flood insurance (page 47), the other on rental car insurance (page 41).

Reference Links

1. <http://media.medialink.com/webnr.aspx?Story=32415>

A Campaign for Hearts and Kidneys

KSFY-13 Passively Discloses, NY1 Shows Another Side

Sioux Falls, SD, ABC affiliate KSFY-13 can claim the dubious honor of providing the most extensive disclosure of a video news release (VNR) documented in this study—but only because it aired, complete and uncut, a pre-packaged segment from a public relations firm.

As is described on page 11, D S Simon Productions instituted a small yet noteworthy change to their VNRs in April 2006, following the release of the Center for Media and Democracy's "Fake TV News" report. The broadcast PR firm added client notifications to the end of its VNRs, comprised of a brief on-screen label naming the client the video was "provided by," plus a sign-off by the narrating publicist saying, "On behalf of [client], I'm [name]."

On August 16, 2006, KSFY-13 anchor Allen Sommerfeld introduced a segment by saying, "A relatively new test could help determine if you have early stages of kidney disease, according to a study published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*. Sonia Martin has the story." Martin is a publicist at D S Simon. The next two minutes of the newscast were a VNR from the American College of Physicians, which describes itself as "the nation's largest medical specialty society."¹

At the end of the KSFY-13 segment, the words "Video provided by American College of Physicians, publisher of *Annals of Internal Medicine*" briefly flashed on the screen and faux reporter Martin intoned, "On behalf of the American College of Physicians, I'm Sonia Martin."

The previous day, New York City cable station NY1 had incorporated the same VNR into a segment by health and fitness reporter Kafi Drexel. More than half of the NY1 segment came from the American College of Physicians VNR, including a soundbite from the study's lead author, Dr. Michael Shlipak.² He linked results from the kidney test to patients' susceptibility to heart disease, heart attacks and strokes.

In addition to the edited and re-voiced VNR, the NY1 segment included two soundbites from an interview conducted by the station, with Dr. Morton Kleiner of Staten Island University Hospital. Kleiner served as a counter-balance to the VNR's glowing coverage of the kidney test, saying that newer test approaches "may be better." He also suggested that overall health monitoring might be the most useful approach to managing kidney disease and related problems—a stunningly common



Client: American College of Physicians
Released: August 2006
Aired By: 2 stations
Disclosed By: 2 stations



Original Amer. Coll. of Phys. VNR
Created by D S Simon Productions
Voiced by publicist



KSFY-13 5:30AM newscast
August 16, 2006
Voiced by publicist



NY1 9:30PM newscast
August 15, 2006
Re-voiced by station reporter

Quicktime video for the American College of Physicians VNR and the newscasts for KSFY-13 and NY1 can be found at <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr44>

sense argument not mentioned in the original VNR.

Kleiner's different perspective illustrates why even VNRs from seemingly authoritative and impartial sources are suspect. Although the American College of Physicians presumably does not stand to profit from increased use of a particular kidney test, it does benefit by associating its major publication with what it presents as very important medical advances.

In addition to including Kleiner's independent assessment, NY1 disclosed the VNR to its viewers—sort of.

Most of the aired segment came from the VNR, but an on-screen label reading "Amer. Coll. of Physicians" only appeared briefly in the opening frames. Given the ambiguous and fleeting nature of this disclosure, viewers—if they noticed the label at all—likely assumed that just a few seconds of footage came from an outside source. No reasonable person (who didn't have access to the original VNR) would conclude that the majority of the segment actually came from a PR firm.

Both stations have aired other VNRs, without any disclosure to news audiences. NY1 was cited in the April 2006 "Fake TV News" report, for airing a VNR from three travel companies.³ KSFY-13 aired two other VNRs described in this study, from Siemens (page 17) and from Matrixx Initiatives (page 13).

Reference Links

1. <http://www.acponline.org/college/aboutacp/aboutacp.htm?hp>
2. <http://www.annals.org/cgi/content/abstract/145/4/237>
3. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/vnr27>

A Scanner Fakely

Two Newscasts Praise Siemens Brand Technology

“This year alone, a staggering 700,000 Americans will suffer a stroke,” WBRZ-2 (Baton Rouge, LA) anchor Sylvia Witherspoon stated, on September 19, 2006. The exact same sentence appears at the top of an announcement¹ from the broadcast PR firm Medialink Worldwide, regarding a video news release (VNR) from Siemens, a multinational electronics and engineering company.

Witherspoon’s word choice was no coincidence. She was introducing a slightly-edited version of the Siemens VNR that she had re-voiced, following Medialink publicist Kate Brookes’ script nearly word for word.

In the original VNR, Brookes says, “Robert Mata’s latest visit with his doctor was a lot more relaxing than his first. That’s when Mata arrived at the Methodist Hospital in Houston by ambulance, bleeding from the brain.” Witherspoon’s version for WBRZ-2 merely deleted the non-local reference: “Robert Mata’s latest visit with his doctor was a lot more relaxing than his first. That’s when Mata was rushed to the hospital, bleeding from the brain.”

The VNR showcases Siemens’ DynaCT imaging application, mentioning it by name four times in just two minutes. The VNR shows the machine in action, from an angle that clearly highlights the Siemens logo. It also includes an interview with Siemens spokesperson Claus Grill. (WBRZ-2 misidentified Grill as being with the “Methodist Neurological Inst,” perhaps to further obscure Siemens’ role in funding and providing the segment.) As the VNR ends, Kate Brookes appears on screen to say, “Doctors say technology like this”—pointing to the machine—“can help put more time on the side of the patient.”

While Witherspoon’s version for WBRZ-2 edited out Brookes’ voice and face, KVCT-19 (Victoria, TX) aired the entire pre-packaged VNR on September 19. The KVCT-19 anchor introducing the segment referred to Brookes, as though she were a reporter: “As Kate Brookes shows us, those numbers [of deaths from strokes] may soon start falling.”

Although both stations’ segments were entirely derived from the Siemens VNR, neither disclosed this fact to their news audience.

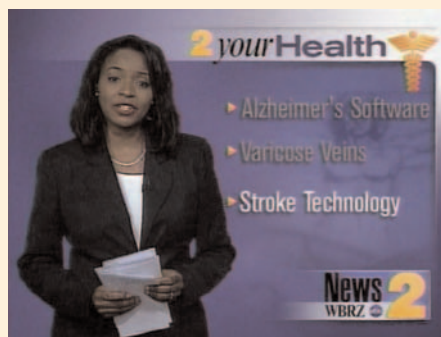
WBRZ-2 may be unable to refuse Kate Brookes’ Siemens VNRs. The station was cited in the April 2006 “Fake TV News”



Client: Siemens
Released: September 2006
Aired By: 2 stations
Disclosed By: No stations



Original Siemens VNR
Created by Medialink
Voiced by publicist



WBRZ-2 5PM newscast
September 19, 2006
Re-voiced by station health reporter

Quicktime video for the Siemens VNR and the WBRZ-2 newscast can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr55>

report, for airing without disclosure a pro-ethanol VNR² from Siemens that also features Brookes on screen. WBRZ-2 news director Chuck Bark explained that earlier VNR broadcast to *The Advocate* of Baton Rouge, LA: “We don’t have a problem with running something from a corporation as long as it is accurate and fair. ... We wouldn’t have someone on the air selling a branded product” (April 19, 2006).

Reference Links

1. <http://www.acponline.org/college/aboutacp/aboutacp.htm?hp>
2. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/vnr16>

Fake Newshounds with Worms

Once Again, WCTI-12 Hosts Hidden Interests

Even with the relatively modest number of video news releases (VNRs) that the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD) has tracked, a few television stations stand out as frequent VNR broadcasters. Oklahoma City's KOKH-25 was singled out as the worst repeat offender of CMD's "Fake TV News" report. But WCTI-12 of New Bern, NC, isn't far behind. In CMD's earlier report, WCTI-12 was cited for airing VNRs from DaimlerChrysler,¹ Sallie Mae,² and multiple consumer electronics companies.³

On July 18, 2006, WCTI-12 reporter Besa Tafilaj introduced a segment on pet parasites. "Those parasites that infect your pets also could get to you and your family," she warned. "According to the CDC [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention], up to three million people will get infected with internal parasites this year." What followed was an edited VNR that she had re-voiced, closely following the VNR's original script.⁴



Client: Companion Animal
Parasite Council
Released: July 2006
Aired By: 1 station
Disclosed By: No stations

The broadcast PR firm D S Simon Productions produced the VNR for the Companion Animal Parasite Council (CAP-C). Like most other D S Simon VNRs released following the "Fake TV News" report, the CAP-C video included two client notifications at its end—an on-screen label and the narrating publicist's sign-off, "On behalf of the Companion Animal Parasite Council, this is Sonia Martin." WCTI-12 edited out both, actively denying disclosure to its news audience. Following the segment, the station anchor directed viewers to CAP-C's website, for "more information on preventing animal parasites and keeping your pets healthy year-round."

D S Simon—and WCTI-12—presented CAP-C as a "non-profit veterinary group," which is correct but not the entire story. Like many patient groups for human diseases, CAP-C receives funding from pharmaceutical and other companies whose market is the target group—in this case, pet owners. CAP-C's 2006 sponsors include Bayer, Merial, Novartis and Pfizer Animal Health at the "platinum" level, while its "silver" sponsors include Hartz, Idexx Laboratories, Schering-Plough Animal Health, VCA Antech, and Virbac Animal Health.⁵

Of the mere 18 media mentions of "Companion Animal Parasite Council" in the Nexis news database, three involve endorsements of products or programs from CAP-C sponsors Bayer or Novartis. While the CAP-C VNR doesn't mention



Original CAP-C VNR

Created by D S Simon Productions
Voiced by publicist



WCTI-12 6AM newscast

July 18, 2006
Re-voiced by station reporter

Quicktime video for the CAP-C VNR and the WCTI-12 newscast can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr47>

specific products, it does repeatedly encourage viewers to take their pets to the veterinarian regularly—a message that must make CAP-C sponsors pretty happy—including VCA Antech, which runs “a nationwide clinical laboratory system and over 375 free-standing animal hospitals”⁶ (NASDAQ symbol: WOOF).

Between the “Fake TV News” report and this study, CMD has documented WCTI-12 airing four different VNRs. Not once did the station disclose the source or nature of these segments to its news audiences. Will this new study help an old dog learn new ethics? Stay tuned.

Reference Links

1. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/vnr28>
2. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/vnr11>
3. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/vnr6>
4. http://media.dssimon.com/taperequest/bcs1_script.pdf
5. http://www.capcvet.org/?p=Sponsors_A&h=0&s=7
6. <http://vcaantech.com>

Yes, But Can It Protect You From Fake News?

Comcast Station Goes All Out To Push Laptop Security Software

From the Department of Unintended Irony: A cable newscast devotes 86 seconds to a report about identity theft while stealing the identity of the segment's true authors.

On September 28, 2006, CN8—the Comcast Network—warned viewers that laptops were becoming an increasingly big target for criminals, not for the resale value but for the sensitive personal information often found on the hard drive. Fortunately, said CN8 consumer reporter Janet Zappala, “there are ways to keep your laptop away from the bad guys.”

Little did viewers know that every fact, frame and soundbite of the story that followed was lifted directly from a video news release (VNR) package commissioned by Trend Micro and designed to promote their commercial security software. The VNR—created by the broadcast PR firm D S Simon Productions—features testimony from Detective David McCain, a high-tech crime investigator who advises users “to have a software program or some type of data protection” on their laptops; and Tom Fragala, a theft victim who wishes he’d had some type of data protection on his laptop. Sure enough, the second half of the VNR focuses on Trend Micro’s “Remote File Lock” system, part of their Internet Security suite that’s available to PC users for an annual cost of \$50. In addition to multiple screenshots of the software in action, the video features a lengthy explanatory soundbite from Trend Micro’s Dave Perry.

As with virtually all D S Simon VNRs released since April 2006, the segment ends with two forms of disclosure: a brief visual label that reads “Video provided by Trend Micro,” and a signoff from the VNR’s narrator: “On behalf of Trend Micro, I’m Sonia Martin.”

In adapting the VNR, CN8 edited out a full minute of the original D S Simon video, including the label that had identified Trend Micro as the source of the story. Additionally, the station replaced Sonia Martin’s narration with the more familiar voice of CN8’s Zappala, thereby removing Martin’s audio disclosure. Despite the heavy edits, CN8 retained every promotional shot of Trend Micro’s Internet Security suite, and included Dave Perry’s soundbite on the many benefits of the “Remote File Lock” feature.

“Sounds good, right?” asked Zappala, immediately after Perry’s pitch. She then referred viewers to Trend Micro’s website. At



Original Trend Micro VNR
Created by D S Simon Productions
Voiced by publicist



CN8 10PM newscast
September 28, 2006
Re-voiced by station reporter

Quicktime video for the Trend Micro VNR and the CN8 newscast can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr59>

Yes, But Can It Protect You From Fake News? (cont'd)

no point did CN8 or Zappala reveal to viewers that the entire story was furnished by publicists on behalf of Trend Micro. Apparently the station left its disclosure on the company laptop. Has anyone seen it lately?

Based in Philadelphia, CN8 is available on Comcast cable systems throughout the American east and northeast. It currently reaches over nine million homes.¹ Its 10PM news program, “Art Fennell Reports,” is also cited in this study for airing two undisclosed VNRs from General Mills; one for Wheaties (page 61) and one for Bisquick (page 46), as well as VNRs from Allstate (page 21) and Nelson’s Rescue Sleep (page 59). In November 2005, Trend Micro released another VNR through D S Simon that appeared without disclosure on newscasts all throughout the country.²

Reference Links

1. <http://www.cn8.tv/channel/article.asp?lChannelID=603&lArticleID=4306&subhead=netwrk>
2. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/vnr4>

Puppy Dog Tales

Report on Natural Pet Food Has Promotional Byproducts

When is a pet food company like an automobile manufacturer? When both downsize their workforce and put money into video news releases (VNRs).

In 2005, the natural pet food company Old Mother Hubbard announced manufacturing layoffs, as did General Motors.¹ “After more than four decades in Lowell, the Old Mother Hubbard plant will stop producing its pet food by June, leaving 100 workers without jobs,” reported *The Sun* (Lowell, MA) on January 28, 2005.

But thanks to broadcast PR firms, Old Mother Hubbard and GM (page 56) continue to receive positive—if fake—TV news coverage. In October 2006, D S Simon Productions promoted a VNR from Old Mother Hubbard titled, “Do You Know What Goes Into Your Dog’s Food?”

The VNR lists unsavory byproducts in many pet foods and offers Old Mother Hubbard’s Wellness brand as “a pioneer in natural pet food” that “goes well beyond government dictated standards—avoiding byproducts.” Unlike most D S Simon VNRs produced since the April 2006 “Fake TV News” report, the VNR does not contain any built-in client notifications.

On October 11, KLBK-13 (Lubbock, TX) aired a re-voiced and slightly edited version of the VNR. The segment mostly followed the VNR script, though the station’s narration did inject a small dose of skepticism into a highly promotional segment, asking: “Are these things [byproducts] really bad for your pets?”

Wellness brand pet food was repeatedly mentioned and shown, but KLBK-13 failed to tell its viewers that every shot and soundbite in the segment actually came from Old Mother Hubbard’s PR cupboard. As described in the “Fake TV News” report, KLBK-13 previously failed to disclose a VNR about high-tech car components.²

On October 16, WKMG-6 (Orlando, FL) anchor Jacqueline London told viewers, “We’ve been investigating what is in the food that you’re feeding your dog. You won’t believe what our pet food probe turned up!”

Then again, you might. The segment was an edited and re-voiced version of the Old Mother Hubbard VNR. WKMG-6



Client: Old Mother Hubbard
Released: October 2006
Aired By: 2 stations
Disclosed By: No stations



Original Old Mother Hubbard VNR
Created by D S Simon Productions
Voiced by publicist



KLBK-13 10PM newscast
October 11, 2006
Re-voiced by station reporter



WKMG-6 5PM newscast
October 16, 2006
Re-voiced by station reporter

Quicktime video for the Old Mother Hubbard VNR and the newscasts for KLBK-13 and WKMG-6 can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr63>

reporter Mike Holfeld added independently-gathered video footage of local pet owners and a pet store, but the segment still prominently featured Wellness brand products.

As the segment ended, Holfeld summed up his advice for viewers: “The message? Read the labels.” Yet WKMG-6 failed to label or otherwise disclose the sponsored video in Holfeld’s “Problem Solvers” segment.

Reference Links

1. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/06/07/ap/business/main700105.shtml>
2. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/vnr23>

Beware of Flood-Damaged Car Stories

Three Stations Fix Up a CARFAX VNR and Sell It As Journalism

“It’s now one year after Hurricane Katrina, and her impact’s still being felt,” declared WDTN-2 consumer reporter Howard Nathan, in the Dayton, OH, station’s August 29 newscast. “Hundreds of thousands of cars were left underwater and declared a total loss. But now Two is on your side to show you exactly how many of these cars can be made to look just like new and may be sold right here.”

Unfortunately, the “Buyer Beware” story should have come with a “Viewer Beware” warning, as every fact and frame of Nathan’s “report” was taken straight from a video news release (VNR) created by publicists and funded by CARFAX.com, a commercial website that lets customers research a vehicle’s history.

The three-minute video—created by the broadcast PR firm Medialink Worldwide—contains plaintive testimony from Diane Zielinski, who had been deceived into buying a flood-damaged car, plus multiple soundbites from CARFAX spokesman Chris Basso. After numerous screenshots of CARFAX.com, the video closes with a heartfelt plug from Zielinski. “Nobody should buy a used car without checking CARFAX.com,” she states. “It saves a lot of money. It saves a lot of headaches, so you don’t have to go through this kind of problem.”

In adapting the VNR, WDTN-2 edited the video for length and enlisted Howard Nathan to re-voice the Medialink publicist’s narration. Throughout the entire two-minute segment, Nathan followed the content and structure of the original Medialink script, occasionally matching it word-for-word. Nathan even encouraged viewers to go online and try CARFAX.com. He did at least mention the website’s \$25 fee, the one piece of information that didn’t come from the original VNR.

At the end of the segment, the station displayed a brief label that said “Carfax.com - Katrina Cars.” While it’s certainly better than no disclosure at all, it would be nearly impossible for viewers to deduce just from the label that the story was furnished by CARFAX.com.

Five days earlier, two other stations had incorporated the VNR into their afternoon newscasts. At KUSA-9 (Denver, CO), anchor Mark Koebrich presented a re-edited and re-voiced version of the VNR that stripped out most mentions of



Client: CARFAX.com
Released: August 29, 2006
Aired By: 3 stations
Disclosed By: 2 stations



Original CARFAX.com VNR

Created by Medialink
Voiced by publicist



WDTN-2 5:30 PM newscast

August 29, 2006
Re-voiced by station reporter

Quicktime video for the CARFAX.com VNR and the WDTN-2 newscast can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr52>

Beware of Flood-Damaged Car Stories (cont'd)

CARFAX.com, and referred viewers instead to a free government website that, like CARFAX, allows users to examine a vehicle's history. At KGTV-10 (San Diego, CA), reporter Marti Emerald adopted her own narrated version of the story, which once again was built entirely from the VNR. Halfway through the story, KGTV-10 flashed an on-screen label that read "Courtesy of Carfax.com," although the disclosure was so brief that it would be easy for viewers to mistakenly assume that CARFAX was only responsible for one brief clip, instead of the entire news story.*

Ultimately, audiences in three states were led to believe they were watching objective journalism, when all they really got was a corporate-funded ad, fixed-up and tricked-out to look like real news.

* The Center for Media and Democracy would like to clarify that, while all of the video in the KGTV-10 segment came from the CARFAX VNR package, reporter Marti Emerald did verbally add information on state and national legislation that came from the station's own reporting. In addition, KGTV-10 managing editor J.W. August has pointed to two on-screen labels—"CARFAX.com - Chris Basso" and "Katrina Cars: Don't Be Fooled - Source: CARFAX.com"—as examples of VNR disclosure. CMD disagrees. The first simply identifies the affiliation of a soundbite speaker, while the second specifically refers to a list of used car buying tips. Neither indicates that the video was funded by, and scripted on behalf of, CARFAX.

Whose Byline Is It Anyway?

One Station is Crystal Clear on a VNR's Source, the Other One Isn't

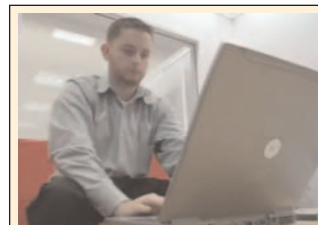
If you're a PC user with security concerns, Computer Associates (CA) would like you to know that they've got your back. On September 27, 2006, the software company announced that any U.S. customer who purchased and registered their 2007 Internet Security Suite would be eligible for up to \$6,500 in virus and identity theft coverage. For the print media, CA issued a lengthy but straightforward press release¹ that explained all the details of their special warranty. For the television crowd, they were a little more creative.

Through D S Simon Productions, CA launched a video news release (VNR) titled "A New Kind of Kidnapping." The two-minute segment, narrated by faux reporter Sonia Martin, begins on an ominous note: "Could you imagine being on your computer and getting a note...demanding money before you get your data back? It's the newly-dubbed 'ransomware,' and it's one of the latest ways crooks try to nab your money and possibly your identity."

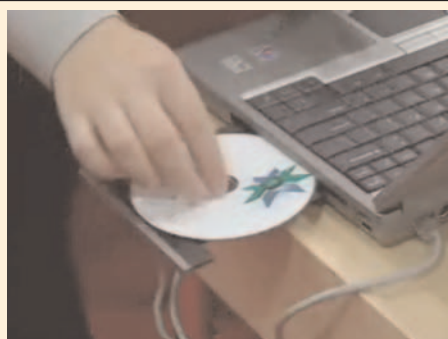
The VNR features soundbites from Sam Curry, CA's Vice President of Security Management, who explains the threat of ransomware in greater detail; and Jay and Linda Foley, a husband-and-wife team who founded the Identity Theft Resource Center after Linda became a victim of online fraud. It's not until the final 30 seconds of the VNR that the focus shifts to CA's 2007 Internet Security Suite, specifically the warranty offer. "What we're offering is more than just software," says Curry. "We're offering peace of mind."

On October 5, the VNR was used by two different newscasts in two different cities, with two different results. WCPO-9 (Cincinnati, OH) ran a 31-second segment on ransomware using soundless footage from the VNR. Instead of plugging CA's software, the station merely recommended that users "have the latest firewalls and anti-virus programs." However, WCPO-9 did mention CA in the one place where it counts. Ten seconds into the story, consumer reporter John Matarese reveals to viewers that the "video was provided to us by Computer Associates."

WCPO-9 had been cited twice in CMD's April 2006 "Fake TV News" report, for airing unlabeled VNR content from a pharmaceutical company² and a floral trade group.³ The station has clearly improved their disclosure policy since then, and is to be commended for identifying the VNR's sponsor to viewers.



Client: Computer Associates
Released: October 2006
Aired By: 2 stations
Disclosed By: 1 station



Original CA VNR

Created by D S Simon Productions
Voiced by publicist



WCPO-9 5:30PM newscast

October 5, 2006
Re-voiced by station reporter



KOIN-6 5AM newscast

October 5, 2006
Re-voiced by station reporter

Quicktime video for the Computer Associates VNR and the newscasts for WCPO-9 and KOIN-6 can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr64>

On the other side of the country, KOIN-6 (Portland, OR) aired a self-produced report on ransomware and ID theft that included nearly a minute of non-promotional content from the VNR. In a story created and reported by anchor Lynn Huston, KOIN-6 incorporated soundless footage from the VNR and used Linda Foley's soundbite in its entirety.

KOIN-6 failed to identify CA as the source of their video, but according to both Huston and KOIN-6 news director Jeff Alan, the station itself was unaware that the material originated from the company. Huston retrieved the footage from Pathfire DMG, a content distribution service that carries both VNRs and legitimate news feeds. In a phone conversation, Huston and Alan attested that the clip in question wasn't properly labeled by Pathfire.

In April 2004, Pathfire announced new VNR labeling features in the interest of "eliminating the confusion and risk that accompanies sourcing VNR material co-mingled or categorized with news service feeds."⁴ Pathfire is currently available to over 1,300 stations across the U.S. and Canada.

Reference Links

1. <http://www3.ca.com/press/PressRelease.aspx?CID=93346>
2. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/vnr10>
3. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/vnr26>
4. http://www.pathfire.com/child/profile/press/press_11.html

WJAR-10 Gives Viewers a Shot in the Dark

Station Uses Flu Vaccine VNR, Omits Disclosure and Risk Info

For nearly ten years, the pharmaceutical industry has enjoyed the right to market its products on television. But the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requires all advertising materials to include “fair balance,” important safety information about potential medical conflicts and side effects.

Although video news releases (VNRs) are subject to the FDA’s fair balance requirements, television newscasts aren’t. So one can only imagine the gratitude that drug companies have for stations like WJAR-10, that are all-too-happy to carry a sales message while leaving safety information behind.

On October 5, 2006, the NBC affiliate in Providence, Rhode Island, devoted its entire “Health Check” segment to FluLaval, a seasonal influenza vaccine that, mere hours earlier, was approved for use by the FDA.

“Every year, more than 200,000 folks in this country are hospitalized because of the flu,” said WJAR-10 health reporter Barbara Morse Silva. “That’s why once again the CDC [U.S. Centers for Disease Control] is recommending folks get a protective shot in the arm: a flu shot. And now there’s a new option. A newly-approved vaccine called FluLaval.”

The story included a soundbite from Dr. William Schaffner, a Vanderbilt University professor who attested that the approval of FluLaval will “add millions of doses to the U.S. vaccine supply and will add a choice for preventing influenza.”

What WJAR-10 viewers had no way of knowing is that the entire story was built from a VNR created by the broadcast PR firm Medialink Worldwide on behalf of GlaxoSmithKline, the makers of FluLaval. WJAR-10 neglected to reveal the pharmaceutical giant as the funding source behind the segment, and failed to provide any of its own research or video to supplement the information provided with the VNR.

WJAR-10 wouldn’t have had to dig very deep to find another side to the story. Affixed to the end of the VNR itself was over two minutes’ worth of fair balance information, which revealed several notable points, including:

FluLaval should not be administered to anyone with known systemic hypersensitivity reactions to egg proteins (eggs or egg products), chicken proteins, or any component of FluLaval.



Client: GlaxoSmithKline
Released: October 2006
Aired By: 1 station
Disclosed By: No stations



Original GlaxoSmithKline VNR

Created by Medialink
Voiced by publicist



WJAR-10 11PM newscast

October 5, 2006
Re-voiced by station health reporter

Quicktime video for the GlaxoSmithKline VNR and the WJAR-10 newscast can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr65>

WJAR-10 Gives Viewers a Shot in the Dark (cont'd)

FluLaval should not be administered to anyone who has had a life-threatening reaction to previous administration of any influenza vaccine.

FluLaval should not be given to individuals with bleeding disorders such as hemophilia or thrombocytopenia[.]

And, most strikingly:

There have been no controlled trials demonstrating a decrease in influenza disease after vaccination with FluLaval.

An independent journalist might have found that last point especially worthy of mention, but apparently the WJAR-10 newsroom didn't. The only fair balance information that made it to the newscast was that FluLaval can't cause infections and is only approved for use in patients 18 or older.

At the end of her segment, Silva referred viewers to the station's website¹ to find out more about the vaccine. Although the site contains a three-year archive of WJAR-10 health stories, the Center for Media and Democracy couldn't find any mention of FluLaval.

Reference Links

1. <http://www.turnto10.com/index.html>

Undisclosed Fake News Includes Hidden Interests

Three Stations Air a Medical VNR, No Questions Asked

“God, what is it? What do you want from me? What is this?”

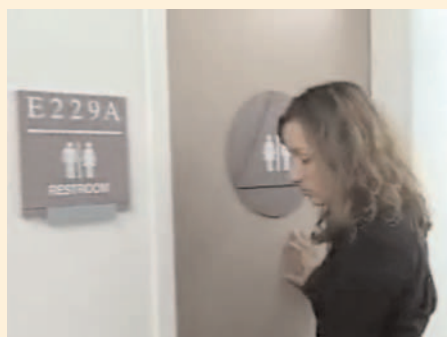
The plaintive quote comes from Cynthia Greenspan, who suffers from irritable bowel syndrome, or IBS. She’s featured in a video news release (VNR) produced for the American College of Physicians by the broadcast PR firm D S Simon Productions. However, viewers could ask the same three questions of television stations that secretly include VNRs in their newscasts.

The VNR describes a study¹ published in the October 17, 2006, issue of the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, the American College of Physicians’ main publication. In the pre-packaged VNR and additional soundbites, Greenspan describes her relief after trying a new IBS treatment, the antibiotic rifaximin. Dr. Mark Pimentel, the lead author of the rifaximin / IBS study, is also featured in the VNR.

However, neither the VNR nor the accompanying information from D S Simon notes the multiple financial interests at play. According to the *Annals’* own website,² the rifaximin / IBS study was funded by Salix Pharmaceuticals, which sells rifaximin



Client: American College of Physicians
Released: October 2006
Aired By: 3 stations
Disclosed By: No stations



Original Amer. Coll. of Phys. VNR

Created by D S Simon Productions
Voiced by publicist



WTNZ-43 10PM newscast

October 16, 2006
Re-voiced by station health reporter



WFLA-8 5PM newscast

October 16, 2006
Re-voiced by station health reporter



WSBT-22 11PM newscast

October 17, 2006
Re-voiced by station health reporter

Quicktime video for the American College of Physicians VNR and the newscasts for WTNZ-43, WFLA-8, and WSBT-22 can be found at <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr69>

Undisclosed Fake News Includes Hidden Interests (cont'd)

(under the brand name Xifaxan) for traveler's diarrhea. Dr. Pimentel is also a paid consultant for Salix, among other pharmaceutical companies.

Moreover, the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles, where Pimentel works, "has a licensing agreement with Salix Pharmaceuticals" and "has a patent on the use of rifaximin to treat IBS," according to the *Annals* and the *Los Angeles Times* (Science File, October 21, 2006), respectively. Lastly, the *Annals* website notes that the rifaximin / IBS study was limited, in that it had a "modest sample size and short duration," and that "most patients were from 1 center."³

These financial ties and caveats do not mean that the rifaximin / IBS study is inaccurate, but they certainly warrant mention in any news account. Unfortunately, instead of an independently-produced and researched report, the news audiences of three TV stations saw undisclosed VNR footage.

On October 16, WTNZ-43 (Knoxville, TN) aired an edited and re-voiced version of the VNR. Pimentel was shown, saying that "we must be treating some mechanism or cause of IBS through this product." Although all video and information presented in the WTNZ-43 segment came directly from the VNR, no disclosure was provided to viewers. When asked about the segment, WTNZ-43's Jamie Foster said, "We do not use VNRs."

The same day, WFLA-8 (Tampa / St. Petersburg, FL) also aired an edited and re-voiced version of the VNR. At least the WFLA-8 anchor stated at the conclusion of the brief segment, "Researchers say a longer, larger study is now needed." Still, no disclosure was given, even though every second of video came from the VNR.

On October 17, WSBT-22 (South Bend / Elkhart, IN) aired a segment that combined VNR footage with what appears to be promotional video of Xifaxan, the brand-name version of rifaximin. The segment did include a contrary soundbite from Dr. Charles Gerson of New York City's Mount Sinai School of Medicine. Dr. Gerson cautioned, "Patients should understand that none of those three symptoms [of IBS, being abdominal pain, constipation and diarrhea] improved in this report, in taking the antibiotic." Yet, WSBT-22 did not disclose the source of the sponsored video.

That broadcasts of this VNR were zero for three on disclosure is noteworthy. Like most D S Simon VNRs produced following the April 2006 "Fake TV News" report, the original VNR ended with on-screen written and verbal notifications of the client behind it—in this case, the American College of Physicians, which also funded another VNR described in this study (page 23).

Reference Links

1. <http://www.annals.org/cgi/content/abstract/145/8/557>
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*

Driven Into the Arms of Others

KHSL-12 Obliges Allstate, KGO-7 Fronts for Three

“The travel industry is forecasting Americans will take more than three hundred and twenty-five million leisure trips this summer, many of them involving the use of a rental car,” KHSL-12 (Chico, CA) anchor Melissa Cabral stated amazedly, on July 3, 2006. “Kate Brookes has some tips to help you avoid any potholes you may travel while you’re on the open road.”

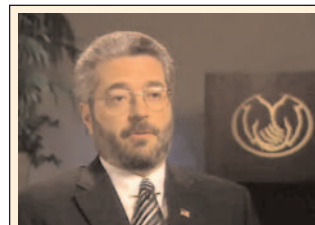
Followers of the Center for Media and Democracy’s (CMD’s) work—or fans of Comedy Central’s *Daily Show*, which ran a segment on CMD’s “Fake TV News” report—might have thought Brookes’ name sounded familiar. She’s the Medialink Worldwide publicist previously outed by CMD for narrating many video news releases (VNRs) and even playing a reporter on screen in several.

The unfortunate Chico viewers who didn’t know Brookes’ real day job were in for a rocky ride. The KHSL-12 segment warned that car renters were liable for accidents, and concluded with Brookes saying, “Vacation should be a time to relax, and taking the insurance on your rental car may give you that extra peace of mind to let you do so.”

The KHSL-12 segment was an entire pre-packaged VNR, produced by Medialink for Allstate Insurance Company. Yet, the station offered no disclosure to its news audience. Responding to CMD’s queries, KHSL-12 news director Trish Coder stated that the station rarely runs VNRs, but doesn’t have any rules about identifying them when used. After being reminded of both the RTNDA’s ethical guidelines¹ on VNR usage and the FCC’s sponsorship identification rules,² anchor Melissa Cabral said, “We were never told about that. It’s not our current policy to do that.”

To the south, San Francisco’s KGO-7 also used the Medialink / Allstate VNR, but with a twist—the station added footage from two other VNR-like videos, plus some original reporting. On June 28, 2006, KGO-7 reporter Michael Finney promised to clear up the “myths and misconceptions about car rentals” that “can cost you,” in his “7 On Your Side” segment.

From the Medialink / Allstate VNR, KGO-7 used footage of car rental counters, families and cars, plus a soundbite from Allstate’s Glen Mancuso (who was seated in front of a large Allstate logo). The KGO-7 segment also featured Lauren Fix, identified simply as “automotive expert,” and Lynn Hayes, identified as the “FamilyTravel.com editor.”



Client: Allstate
Released: June 2006
Aired By: 2 stations
Disclosed By: No stations



Original Allstate VNR
Created by Medialink
Voiced by publicist



KHSL-12 12PM newscast
July 3, 2006
Re-voiced by station reporter



KGO-7 6PM newscast
June 28, 2006
Re-voiced by station reporter

Quicktime video for the Allstate VNR and the newscasts for KHSL-12 and KGO-7 can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr45>

In the previous weeks, both Fix and Hayes had starred in sponsored videos produced and distributed by DWJ Television, a broadcast PR firm like Medialink. Fix's five-minute video³ promoted GPS driving systems, first aid kits, diagnostic devices for car problems, and games for the kids. Hayes' nearly four-minute video⁴ promoted rental cars, traveler's checks, hotel programs and theme parks.

While KGO-7 did not take material directly from the DWJ videos, the station's segment showed Fix and Hayes speaking from the same studio, wearing the same clothes, and discussing the same products and topics as they did in the DWJ videos. For example, KGO-7 showed Lauren Fix promoting a GPS system. "One of the easiest ways to save money this summer is to get yourself a GPS unit. ... The NavView will help you redirect around roadblocks or collisions," she advised.

KGO-7 did not provide any disclosure to its viewers, even though the only part of its segment that appears to have come from the station's own reporting was a comparison of rental car prices from different Washington DC locations.

After reviewing the segment, KGO-7 news director Kevin Keeshan called it a "clear violation of our written policy on the use of video news releases." He said the station had obtained the Allstate VNR from the Pathfire digital video feed system, but was unsure of the source of the Fix and Hayes soundbites. "We are absolutely redoubling our efforts to make sure it does not happen again," he stressed.

Reference Links

1. <http://www.rtnda.org/foi/finalvnr.shtml>
2. http://hraunfoss.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/FCC-05-84A1.pdf
3. <http://moreaboutthat.info/189/>
4. <http://www.moreaboutthat.info/201/>

Kansas City Newsroom on Auto Play

WDAF-4's Safety Segment Really a GM Ad

The broadcast PR firms that produce video news releases (VNRs) do everything they can to simplify the lives of television news staff. They give each VNR a “hook”—an upcoming holiday, a cautionary tale, or hints for savvy consumers. They provide a scripted introduction to the VNR. They even come up with bad puns related to the VNR subject. It's so easy that all TV stations need to do is download the video and press “play.”

That's just what WDAF-4 (Kansas City, MO) did on May 18, 2006, when it aired a VNR titled “Vehicle Crash Safety” from General Motors (GM).

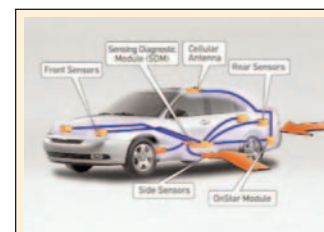
Local anchor Mark Alford introduced the segment by saying, “Most safety advocates agree that fastening your seat belt is the best way to survive a crash.” Then he mentioned the “National Click It or Ticket” law enforcement effort to increase seat belt use, as described in the VNR script. Lastly, he introduced Chris Hansen, who would show—in Alford's words—“how safety belts, combined with other automotive safety technologies, are protecting all of us on the road.”

Chris Hansen isn't a reporter, though he plays one on TV. He's a publicist for the PR firm Medialink Worldwide.

For the next two minutes, WDAF-4 viewers were presented with a complete, pre-packaged VNR. It was overtly promotional, touting features available on GM cars—StabiliTrak “electronic stability control,” hi-tech airbags that surround passengers, and OnStar's “in-vehicle communications technology.” Oh, and seat belts. The experts quoted were Dr. Ronald M. Stewart from the University of Texas, Rich Golitko from Bosch, Carmen Benavides from GM and Jeff Perry from OnStar, a company owned by GM.

But Kansas City viewers were kept safe—from knowing who was behind the segment. WDAF-4 did not offer any disclosure of the VNR. When contacted regarding the segment, WDAF-4 news director Bryan McGruder refused to comment.

WDAF-4 was also cited in the April 2006 “Fake TV News” report, for airing a version of an American Dental Association VNR that appears to have been edited and distributed by the FOX Network.¹



Client: General Motors
Released: May 2006
Aired By: 1 station
Disclosed By: No stations

Reference Links

1. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/vnr1>



Original General Motors VNR

Created by Medialink
Voiced by publicist



WDAF-4 12:30 PM newscast

May 18, 2006
Voiced by publicist

Quicktime video for the General Motors VNR and the WDAF-4 newscast can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr38>

I Want a New (Birth Control) Drug

KYW-3 Helps Push Brand-Name Pills

For pharmaceutical companies, receiving U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval for a new drug is always good news. And an expiring patent on an old drug is always bad news.

In 2006, Barr Pharmaceuticals faced both scenarios. The company's exclusive rights to produce its major seller, Seasonale, were set to expire in September and another company was readying a generic version. Seasonale is an "extended-regimen" oral contraceptive for women that reduces the average number of menstrual cycles per year, from 13 to four. In mid-2006, the drug accounted "for about 10% of Barr's total sales and a far higher percentage of profits," according to *Crain's New York Business*.

Barr placed its hopes in a slightly-reformulated new contraceptive, Seasonique, which received FDA approval in May. While one analyst told *United Press International* that "there would be little incentive for consumers and providers to choose the more expensive branded option over a cheaper generic," others pointed to the power of marketing. "With promotion focused on Seasonique, uptake will be good enough to keep the franchise from disappearing," said Prudential's David Woodburn.

Promotion, in this case, included a video news release (VNR).

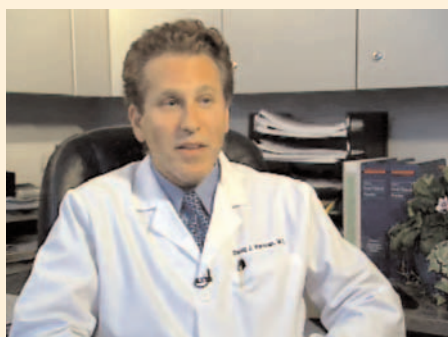
In late May, Medialink Worldwide released a VNR funded by Barr Pharmaceuticals, titled "FDA Approves New Birth Control Pills." The VNR refers to Seasonique as "the wave of the future" and "the latest choice for women."

The VNR features Dr. David Portman, who is identified as "Director / Clinical Instructor, Department of Ob/Gyn." Portman is the founder and principal investigator at the Columbus Center for Women's Health Research¹ in Columbus, Ohio, and a clinical instructor at Ohio State University. He's also quoted in a May 2006 Barr Pharmaceuticals press release² about the company's estrogen pills, suggesting a more-than-casual relationship between the drugmaker and the doctor.

On May 26, 2006, Philadelphia's KYW-3 aired a story about Seasonique. In her introduction, anchor Stephanie Stahl called the drug "a new kind of birth control pill that's giving women a dramatic new option."



Client: Barr Pharmaceuticals
Released: May 2006
Aired By: 1 station
Disclosed By: 1 station



Original Barr Pharmaceuticals VNR
Created by Medialink
Voiced by publicist



KYW-3 4PM news segment
May 26, 2006
Re-voiced by station health reporter

Quicktime video for the Barr Pharmaceuticals VNR and the KYW-3 newscast can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr43>

I Want a New (Birth Control) Drug (cont'd)

That segment, from KYW-3 medical reporter Stephanie Stahl, is remarkably similar to the Medialink / Barr VNR. Both show Dr. Portman and a female patient giving glowing testimonials about Seasonique from a clinical-looking setting. Yet only a few seconds of the KYW-3 segment appear to have come directly from the VNR. Through the station's legal advisor, KYW-3 station news director Susan Schiller explained that the Portman and patient interviews came from video footage shot by Columbus, OH, CBS affiliate WBNS-10.

KYW-3 deserves criticism for promoting a brand-name drug during its "Health Alert" segment, and for failing to inform viewers that a generic version of nearly the exact same drug would soon be available. But the station does deserve recognition for clearly indicating, both verbally and with an on-screen label, that some footage did come from the Barr / Medialink VNR.

In her closing remarks, reporter Stahl also tried to do the right thing by alluding to risks associated with the prescription drug, albeit briefly and vaguely. While the original VNR listed such side effects as "blood clots, stroke, and heart attack" (risks presented by birth control pills in general), Stahl merely said: "Some doctors say there are no long-term studies on skipping periods, so some are still questioning the safety of contiguous use of hormones."

Some women's health advocates might agree.

KYW-3 was also cited in the April 2006 "Fake TV News" report, for airing a VNR from a health supplement company. In that case, the station questioned claims made in the original VNR, but failed to disclose the source of the footage.³

Reference Links

1. <http://www.centerwatch.com/professional/pro826.html>
2. http://phx.corporate-ir.net/phoenix.zhtml?c=60908&p=irol-newsArticle_Print&ID=853213&highlight=
3. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/vnr31>

News Flash: Art Fennell Loves Pancakes

For Bisquick's Birthday, CN8 Gives Away Its Viewers

Coming up with timely “hooks” for General Mills’ video news releases (VNRs) must be difficult. After all, the company’s products—cake mixes, cereals and baking mixes—don’t easily lend themselves to a news context.

Yet, the broadcast PR firm Medialink Worldwide has been successful at producing VNRs for General Mills that are aired in television newscasts. As described in the April 2006 “Fake TV News” report, a “National Pancake Week” VNR was aired on four stations.¹ And General Mills reached more news viewers with the Wheaties and Halloween VNRs tracked for this study (pages 61 and 15, respectively).

In October 2006, Medialink publicists crafted another VNR for General Mills, based appropriately enough on old Bisquick advertisements. The hook was Bisquick’s 75th anniversary, and Comcast’s CN8 (Philadelphia, PA) swallowed it, line and sinker.

On October 3, CN8’s Janet Zappala introduced an edited version of the Bisquick VNR that she had re-voiced. “Remember Bisquick?” she asked eponymous host Art Fennell. “Seventy-five years ago is when it was first discovered,” she added, as though the product were a new continent. The following segment, which came entirely from the VNR, almost continually featured the Bisquick logo and/or packaging on screen.

CN8 failed to appropriately label the ingredients of its newscast that evening. No disclosure of the Bisquick VNR was provided to the nine million U.S. homes that receive the station.

Unfortunately, that appears to be CN8 standard practice. The station aired four other VNRs described in this study, for Wheaties (page 61), Trend Micro (page 29), Allstate (page 21) and Nelson’s Rescue Sleep (page 59). Not once was any attempt made to disclose the nature or source of the sponsored video.



Client: General Mills/Bisquick
Released: September 2006
Aired By: 1 station
Disclosed By: No stations

Reference Links

1. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/vnr33>



Original General Mills VNR

Created by Medialink
Voiced by publicist



CN8 10PM newscast

October 3, 2006
Re-voiced by station reporter

Quicktime video for the General Mills VNR and the CN8 newscast can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr61>

KLFY-10 Carries Water for Allstate

Station Pushes Flood Insurance Over Journalism

The devastation of the 2005 hurricane season, especially along the U.S. Gulf Coast, caused many people to think about race and class disparities, the proper role of government, and the at-times overwhelming power of nature. Or, if you work at an insurance company, how to sell more policies.

As the 2006 hurricane season approached, Allstate Insurance Company commissioned a video news release (VNR) from the broadcast PR firm Medialink Worldwide. The resulting segment, “Who Needs Flood Insurance?” tells the story of Troy Thoden, whose house was flooded by Hurricane Floyd. The VNR also features Allstate agent Crystal Heydari, who describes how and when homeowners can buy flood insurance, as a large Allstate logo looms in the background.



Client: Allstate
Released: June 2006
Aired By: 1 station
Disclosed By: No stations

On June 5, 2006, KLFY-10 (Lafayette, LA) anchor Darla Montgomery introduced an edited version of the VNR that she had re-voiced. “Hurricane season is here,” she warned, “and that means millions of people may be subject to floods.”

All of the footage shown and everything Montgomery said came straight from the VNR package. Thoden’s soundbites were gone, but Heydari’s hurricane hints remained. Allstate was not identified as the source of the segment.

Viewers in the Lafayette area, which was impacted by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, were likely wondering how to better protect themselves and their belongings during potential future floods. Instead of meeting that real community need with independent reporting, KLFY-10 offered “news” that was actually a covert Allstate ad.

The following month, KLFY-10 aired another VNR tracked in this study, from General Motors (page 53). Again, the station failed to disclose the segment to news audiences.

The station’s policy is to “not run video news releases,” said KLFY-10 news director C.J. Hoyt. He couldn’t speak to the two VNR broadcasts documented in this report, but identified miscommunication, confusion and staff turnover as possible factors. “There’s no reason to use a VNR,” he stated. “It’s generally just a commercial for a product and that’s not what we’re in the business of doing.”



Original Allstate VNR
Created by Medialink
Voiced by publicist



KLFY-10 6PM newscast
June 5, 2006
Re-voiced by station reporter

Quicktime video for the Allstate VNR and the KLFY-10 newscast can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr39>

Multiple Soundbites for Novartis

VNR Touts Drug Before FDA Approval

Most video news releases (VNRs) about prescription drugs are released as the drug receives final approval from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Novartis opted for a different approach, promoting a drug still in the regulatory pipeline.

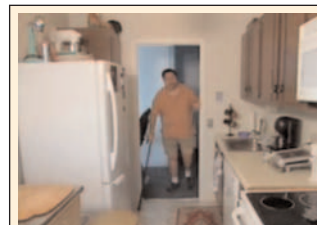
In September 2006, the company's FTY720 drug (also known as fingolimod) was found to have "reduced the number of lesions detected ... and clinical disease activity in patients with multiple sclerosis," according to a study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.¹ The same month, FTY720 entered Phase III trials, for treating relapsing forms of multiple sclerosis (MS)—and Novartis commissioned a VNR from the broadcast PR firm MultiVu.

The Novartis VNR tells the story of MS patient Ken Laws. He "has been on many of the currently-available treatments for MS, all given by injection, and had mixed results," says the VNR narrator. The VNR ends with Ken and a woman playing cards, as the narrator explains that FTY720 "is now being tested in a larger number of people, and Ken is hopeful that he, and others living with MS, may soon have more treatment options." The VNR also features Doctors Anthony Reder and Ludwig Kappos.

Why would Novartis promote a drug not yet approved for sale? Perhaps it wanted to get a head start on the competition. "A number of big pharma groups are working on MS treatments. Many next-generation products are expected to be oral," London's *Financial Times* reported on January 13, 2006. "Novartis believes its FTY720 compound could set a new 'gold standard' for the industry."

The financial stakes are considerable, according to the September 1, 2006, edition of *Med Ad News*. "If approved, FTY720 could record sales of \$50 million in 2010, according to Bernstein Research analysts," reported Steve Niles. "Sales could increase to \$300 million by 2012."

Four television stations aired re-voiced and edited versions of the Novartis VNR: WSYX-6 (Columbus, OH) on September 15; and KBAK-29 (Bakersfield, CA), KSFY-27 (Springfield, MO), and KCOP-13 (Los Angeles, CA), all on September 14. The segment that each station aired came wholly from the Novartis VNR and extra soundbite video. No station disclosed the



Client: Novartis
Released: September 2006
Aired By: 4 stations
Disclosed By: No stations



Original Novartis VNR

Created by MultiVu, Inc.
Voiced by publicist



WSYX-6 6AM newscast

September 15, 2006
Re-voiced by station reporter

Quicktime video for the Novartis VNR and the WSYX-6 newscast can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr53>

VNR to its news audience. And none mentioned any of the “adverse events” observed with FTY720 to date, which rapidly scroll across the screen at the end of the original VNR.

KBAK-29 news director Meaghan St. Pierre said that, according to station records, “We took that [Novartis segment] from FOX News ... and nothing suggested it was a video news release. It was presented as a news story.” She said that station policy is not to use VNRs “as a solo source” for a news story, and to disclose when VNR footage is aired.

Two other stations are repeat fake news offenders. KCOP-13 aired the Oticon VNR described in this study (page 11), after removing its built-in disclosures. WSYX-6 was cited in the April 2006 “Fake TV News” report, for airing a VNR from three consumer electronics companies.²

Reference Links

1. <http://content.nejm.org/cgi/content/abstract/355/11/1124>
2. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/vnr6>

WAKA-8 Takes the Back Seat

Station Forgets to Credit GM For a Story on Teen Drivers

There's no denying it: General Motors puts out a lot of fake news. Some of their video news releases (VNRs) are ridiculously self-promotional (page 19). Some are just plain wrong.¹ And some would be fairly benign—if they were properly disclosed.

Unfortunately, in seemingly every case, television stations fail to identify GM as the funding source of the story, effectively disguising the automaker's work as their own objective journalism.

Case in point: WAKA-8 in Montgomery, AL. On September 25, 2006, the station's 6PM newscast incorporated a VNR that, on the surface, was all about reducing the risks for teenage drivers. The original VNR, created by the broadcast PR firm Medialink Worldwide, includes several intuitive tips for parents of new drivers, as well as helpful soundbites from John Ulczycki, director of the Transportation Safety Group at the National Safety Council.

On the more promotional side, the VNR features testimony from Stephanie Gehl, a GM Service and Parts Operations Portfolio manager, who urges parents to keep the vehicle in top condition. The segment closes with a plug for cars with an in-vehicle communication service, such as GM's OnStar. According to Medialink narrator Chris Hansen, OnStar "has a number of emergency service features to give you a little extra peace of mind."

In adapting the VNR, WAKA-8 dropped Gehl's soundbite and the self-promotion for OnStar. Additionally, the station enlisted evening anchor Glenn Halbrooks to replace Hansen's narration. At no point did Halbrooks or WAKA-8 list General Motors as the source of their story. The station also failed to provide any of its own research or video to supplement the information provided in the VNR.



Client: General Motors
Released: September 2006
Aired By: 1 station
Disclosed By: No stations

Reference Links

1. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/vnr32>



Original General Motors VNR

Created by Medialink
Voiced by publicist



WAKA-8 6PM newscast

September 25, 2006
Re-voiced by station anchor

Quicktime video for the General Motors VNR and the WAKA-8 newscast can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr57>

The Morning-After Shills

Stations Air Pharmaceutical Company VNR Without Attribution

On August 24, 2006, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved Levonorgestrel—more commonly known as the Plan B emergency contraceptive—for over-the-counter sale to women 18 and older. Within hours, television newscasts all across the country devoted airtime to the FDA's important decision.

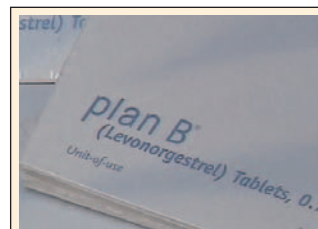
Unfortunately, at least one of those stories was ill-conceived. Ignoring the ethical guidelines of the Radio-Television News Directors Association¹ and violating the Federal Communications Commission's sponsorship identification rules,² WSVN-7 (Miami, FL) padded its Plan B story with material taken straight from a promotional video news release (VNR) created by publicists and funded by the pharmaceutical company that manufactures Plan B.

In anticipation of the FDA's announcement, Barr Pharmaceuticals had contracted MultiVu to create a VNR that heralded the wider availability of Plan B as a major advance for women. In addition to multiple screenshots of the Plan B package, the 94-second video included positive soundbites from Nancy Roberson Jasper, Assistant Clinical Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at Columbia University; and Kathleen Hill-Besinque, Associate Professor of Clinical Pharmacy at University of Southern California.

In covering the Plan B development, WSVN-7 ran a two-minute story that contained over 60 seconds of content from the VNR. The station included virtually every Plan B product shot provided by MultiVu, and lifted key soundbites from both Roberson Jasper and Hill-Besinque. At no point did WSVN-7 or health reporter Tiffani Tucker disclose to viewers that nearly half the story was furnished by the makers of Plan B. Tucker did mention nausea and bleeding as two potential side effects of the pill.

In response to the Center for Media and Democracy's queries regarding the newscast, WSVN-7 news director Tom Gonzalez-Diego insisted—despite all evidence to the contrary—that the story contained no VNR material. He asserted that the station has a strict policy against using VNRs or VNR footage.

The same day, ABC News committed a smaller offense on a larger scale. In creating its story on Plan, the network dropped in



Client: Barr Pharmaceuticals
Released: August 2006
Aired By: 2 stations
Disclosed By: No stations



Original Barr Pharmaceuticals VNR
Created by MultiVu, Inc.
Voiced by publicist



WSVN-7 10PM newscast
August 24, 2006
Re-voiced by station health reporter



WABC-7 11PM newscast
August 24, 2006
Re-voiced by station health reporter

Quicktime video for the Barr Pharmaceuticals VNR and the newscasts for WSVN-7 and WABC-7 can be found at <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr51>

one VNR soundbite from Hill-Besinque without attributing Barr Pharmaceuticals as the source of the material. The story was presumably put on the ABC newfeed, since it appeared virtually unaltered on at least nine major ABC affiliates, including KABC-7 (Los Angeles), KGO-7 (San Francisco), KMGH-7 (Denver), WABC-7 (New York), WCVB-5 (Boston), WJLA-7 (Washington DC), WLS-7 (Chicago), WPLG-10 (Miami), and WTAE-4 (Pittsburgh). These nine stations may not have known that the segment they aired included footage from the Barr VNR. (In this report, these nine newscasts are tallied as one VNR broadcast, and the nine ABC affiliates as one TV station, representing the originator of the segment.)

Reference Links

1. <http://www.rtnda.org/foi/finalvnr.shtml>
2. http://hraunfoss.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/FCC-05-84A1.pdf

This Just in: GM Loves Kids

KLFY-10 Child Safety Segment Really a Car Ad

To increase sales to parents, automobile manufacturers go out of their way to present their cars (and themselves) as “child-friendly.” So it’s not surprising that an automaker would commission a video news release (VNR) about its child safety seat program. In fact, the Center for Media and Democracy’s “Fake TV News” report included a child safety seat VNR from DaimlerChrysler.¹

In July 2006, the broadcast PR firm Medialink Worldwide produced a VNR for General Motors titled, “Improving Child Safety in and Around Cars.” The segment promotes the “Safe Kids Buckle Up” program, a GM-sponsored initiative that offers “child passenger safety education and hands-on assistance” with safety seats, according to its website. The VNR featured Torine Creppy of the Safe Kids program and concerned father Jeff Weaver.

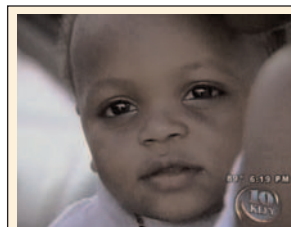
The most revealing soundbite of the VNR came from GM head Rick Wagoner. “We find that if we work with Safe Kids and offer these types of clinics, at our local dealerships all around the country, we not only can do good ... occasionally we can sell an extra car or two,” he said. “So, it works on all sides.”

Unfortunately, KLFY-10 (Lafayette, LA) didn’t include Wagoner’s candid soundbite, when it aired the VNR on July 12, 2006. The station broadcast an edited version of the VNR, re-voiced by local reporter Blue Rolfes. Rolfes’ “Eye on Health” segment opened with a few seconds from a recent KLFY-10 report, which proved once and for all that it is not safe for small children to play in parking lots.

The segment closed with station anchor Darla Montgomery providing a near-verbatim reading of the last few lines of the VNR script. No disclosure was provided to viewers of “Acadiana’s Local News Leader.”

The previous month, KLFY-10 had aired another VNR tracked in this study, from Allstate (page 47). Again, the station failed to disclose the source of the video.

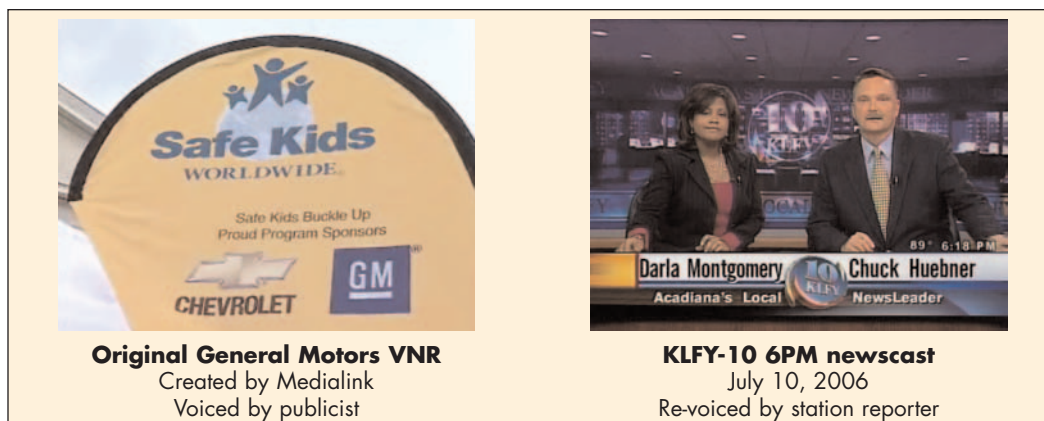
The station’s policy is to “not run video news releases,” said KLFY-10 news director C.J. Hoyt. He couldn’t speak to the two VNR broadcasts documented in this report, but identified miscommunication, confusion and staff turnover as possible factors. “There’s no reason to use a VNR,” he stated. “It’s generally just a commercial for a product and that’s not what we’re in the business of doing.”



Client: General Motors
Released: July 2006
Aired By: 1 station
Disclosed By: No stations

Reference Links

1. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/vnr32>



Original General Motors VNR
Created by Medialink
Voiced by publicist

KLFY-10 6PM newscast
July 10, 2006
Re-voiced by station reporter

Quicktime video for the General Motors VNR and the KLFY-10 newscast can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr46>

Signaling Support for Siemens

Warning: Pilots and XETV-6 Viewers May See Red

“Thanks to new technology, air travelers may soon be a little bit safer,” said XETV-6 (San Diego, CA) anchor Brian Christie. “Not in the air, but on the runway.”

In the June 20, 2006, segment, Christie casually mentioned that “the FAA reports about 300 runway accidents a year.” That’s a bit of an overstatement.

According to the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration, recent years have seen some 300 runway *incursions* annually. An incursion includes “any occurrence in the airport runway environment involving an aircraft, vehicle, person or object ... that creates a collision hazard.”¹ Nearly 90 percent of incursions “involved little or no risk of a collision,” according to the FAA.²

Such are the dangers of re-voicing a video news release (VNR). In the original VNR, produced by Medialink Worldwide for Siemens, publicist and fake reporter Kate Brookes says that “the FAA reports about 300 runway *incidents* every year.” By switching “incidents” for “accidents,” XETV-6 created the image of 300 fiery crashes instead of mostly-minor glitches in flight protocol.

Siemens might not mind the blunder, however. The purpose of its VNR was to promote the company’s new Runway Status Light System,³ a pilot program using sensors and red lights to visually warn airplanes approaching an occupied runway.

The VNR featured Ed Runyon, who works for Siemens’ Airfield Solutions division. The XETV-6 segment—an edited version of the VNR re-voiced by anchor Christie—claimed that Siemens’ runway system “is considered very revolutionary.” The station then showed Runyon describing the product that his employer would like to install at thousands of airports across the United States. A similarly-skewed story on the website of New York City’s WABC-7 asks why the Siemens system is “still so far from being installed here.”⁴

Siemens’ runway light system is currently being tested at the Dallas-Fort Worth and San Diego international airports. According to an April 2006 *USA Today* article, “The money-strapped FAA has not yet committed to fund the system,” though



Client: Siemens
Released: June 2006
Aired By: 1 station
Disclosed By: No stations



Original Siemens VNR
Created by Medialink
Voiced by publicist



XETV-6 10PM newscast
June 20, 2006
Re-voiced by station anchor

Quicktime video for the Siemens VNR and the XETV-6 newscast can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr42>

an FAA official called it “very promising.”⁵ The VNR may be part of Siemens’ efforts to secure FAA approval—and funding.

Yet one warning system completely failed: Although every frame of the aired segment came from the Siemens VNR, XETV-6 did not provide disclosure to its San Diego viewers. Perhaps the station’s newsroom had its signals crossed?

Reference Links

1. <http://www.faa.gov/runwaysafety/>
2. <http://www.faa.gov/runwaysafety/pdf/report5.pdf>
3. http://www.usa.siemens.com/index.jsp?sd_c_p=fmls4uo1386349n1171438i1386350pc194z3&sd_c_sid=24726446733&
4. <http://abclocal.go.com/wabc/story?section=investigators&id=4490227>
5. http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/techinnovations/2006-04-23-runway-safety-system_x.htm

General Motors Gets a Free Ride in New York

WPIX-11 Adds Soundtrack, But No Disclosure, To Fake News

On August 4, 2006, WPIX-11 anchor Tiffany McElroy asked morning news viewers, “OK, you want a hybrid car, but the Toyota Prius just doesn’t do it for you? Well, you’re in luck.” But the segment wasn’t so auspicious for New York City viewers who want honesty in their newscasts.

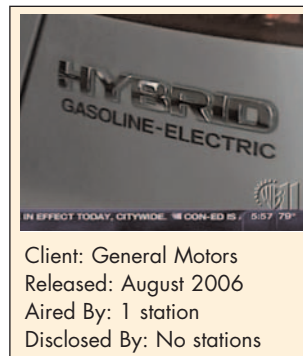
What followed was a video news release (VNR) from a Toyota competitor, General Motors (GM). The segment was filmed at the first-ever Hybrid Fest,¹ a real event organized by volunteers and held in Madison, WI, in July 2006. The VNR features Wisconsin state representative Joe Parisi and GM engineer Pete Savagian, who extoll the increasing variety of hybrid models available and the fuel savings enjoyed by hybrid owners.

For General Motors, the VNR is a soft sell. Its models aren’t mentioned by name, although the camera lingers over a Saturn hybrid and the only auto expert interviewed is from the company.

The VNR is likely part of GM’s efforts to establish itself in the hybrid market. In an April 2006 piece titled, “Challenging Toyota’s Hybrid Hegemony,” the *New York Times* reported on a new hybrid system jointly developed by BMW, DaimlerChrysler and General Motors, to “finally” give the three auto makers the “technology to counter Toyota, which is developing its third-generation hybrid.”²

Whatever GM’s rationale, the VNR suited WPIX-11 just fine. The station re-voiced the narration, shaved a few seconds off the VNR, and shuffled the order of the scenes and soundbites. Just for kicks, WPIX-11 also added a soundtrack—“Free Ride,” performed by the Edgar Winter Group. WPIX-11 didn’t add any of its own reporting to the segment, just standard background footage of cars and gas stations. Yet the station failed to tell viewers that this “news” segment came courtesy of GM.

WPIX-11 is used to letting outside interests steer its newscasts. The station was cited in the Center for Media and Democracy’s “Fake TV News” report, for airing a VNR from a computer security company.³ And GM is certainly used to being in the driver’s seat. The Hybrid Fest VNR is the seventh of eight from the car company tracked by CMD, all of which were produced by the broadcast PR firm Medialink Worldwide.



Reference Links

1. <http://www.madison.com/archives/read.php?ref=/wsj/2006/07/23/0607220250.php>
2. http://www.cleanenergypartnership.org/news/article_detail.cfm?id=180
3. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/vnr4>



Quicktime video for the General Motors VNR and the WPIX-11 newscast can be found at <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr48>

More Than Meets the Eye

WYTV-33 Promotes Lens Replacements

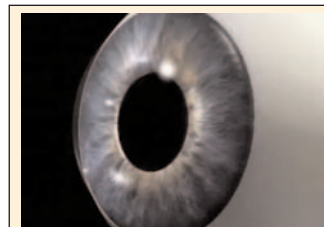
“When cataracts close in over our eyes, our vision grows worse, and the older we get, the more likely we’re going to have this problem,” WYTV-33 (Youngstown, OH) health reporter Len Rome said, on October 16, 2006. “Well, surgeons today can permanently replace the cloudy, natural lens of your eye with a polymer plastic lens.”

Roughly half of the segment that followed came from a video news release (VNR) produced by the broadcast PR firm MultiVu for Advanced Medical Optics, the makers of the ReZoom brand lens implant.

The VNR—and the WYTV-33 segment—repeatedly mention the ReZoom implant by name. Both feature Beverly Hills eye surgeon Dr. Kerry Assil, who says, “The ReZoom lens is somewhat revolutionary, because it’s ... not only getting rid of the dirty windshield in the pathway, which is the cataract, but also getting rid of their glasses at the same time.”

WYTV-33 edited and re-voiced the VNR, and added to it what appears to be independently-gathered video of a local ophthalmologist (who is seen but not heard). The station failed to disclose the source of the sponsored video. And the only quasi-caveat offered by reporter Len Rome is that “the operation remains fairly expensive, but it is another option for aging eyes.”

This is not the first time that WYTV-33 has fronted for unseen interests. The station was cited in the “Fake TV News” report, for airing a VNR promoting a prescription skin cream, without disclosure.¹



Client: Advanced Medical Optics
Released: October 2006
Aired By: 1 station
Disclosed By: No stations

Reference Links

1. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/vnr10>



Original Advanced Medical Optics VNR

Created by MultiVu, Inc.
Voiced by publicist



WYTV-33 6AM newscast

October 16, 2006
Re-voiced by station reporter

Quicktime video for the Advanced Medical Optics VNR and the WYTV-33 newscast can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr62>

Lost in Translation

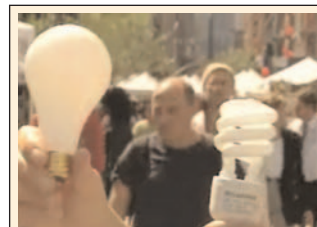
Spanish-Language Newscast Adapts VNR but Forgets the Disclosure

On October 8, 2006, WLTV-23—a Spanish-language station in Miami, Florida—aired a news report on compact fluorescent light bulbs. The two-and-a-half minute feature included positive soundbites from Stephanie Anderson, a Sylvania spokeswoman; and Wendy Reed, a campaign manager at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s “Energy Star” program. Although Anderson and Reed both admitted that compact fluorescent lights are more expensive than traditional incandescent bulbs, the energy cost savings more than make up for it, they said. Reed added that fluorescent bulbs are better for the environment, since reduced energy consumption lowers greenhouse gas emissions.

Sounds good, except that WLTV-23 failed to inform its viewers that the entire story was built from a video news release (VNR) funded by Siemens AG, the corporate parent of Sylvania. The VNR, created by the broadcast PR firm Medialink Worldwide and narrated by publicist Kate Brookes, was produced entirely in the English language.

It’s unknown if Medialink assisted with the Spanish translation of the VNR. In recent years, the company has established deep connections to Hispanic media markets, most notably through its Radio Noticias service.¹ But WLTV-23 could have just as easily converted the script on its own.

In either case, WLTV-23 provided dubbed translations of all VNR soundbites, and enlisted its own meteorologist/environmental reporter, Paola Elorza, to introduce and narrate the segment. Aside from the translation, WLTV-23 made only minimal edits to the original VNR. The station didn’t supplement the story with any of its own video, and completely failed to identify the VNR’s funding source to its audience. To comply with FCC sponsor identification rules, all they had to say was “*Producido por Siemens.*”



Client: Siemens
Released: October 2006
Aired By: 1 station
Disclosed By: No stations

Reference Links

1. <http://www.prnewswire.com/cgi-bin/stories.pl?ACCT=104&STORY=/www/story/112484&EDATE=>



Original Siemens VNR
Created by Medialink
Voiced by publicist



WLTV-23 11PM newscast
October 8, 2006
Re-voiced in Spanish by station reporter

Quicktime video for the Siemens VNR and the WLTV-23 newscast can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr66>

What's Sex Got To Do with It?

Two Newsrooms Sleep as 'Hard Sell' VNR Airs

To increase the chances of their video news releases (VNRs) being used by television stations, broadcast PR firms usually limit direct references to the particular product or company being promoted. That isn't the case with a VNR titled "Sleep Is the New Sex," which was produced by D S Simon Productions for Nelson's Rescue Sleep.

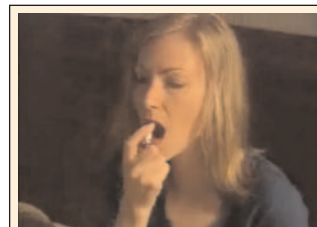
This VNR is all about product promotion. After raising concerns about the safety of sleeping pills, the VNR presents an herbal product, "Rescue Sleep," as the next best thing since counting sheep.

The VNR calls Rescue Sleep "the most effective solution" to one former insomniac's "sleepless nights," and a product that's "proven to help you relax," with "no known side effects." Rescue Sleep's logo and packaging are prominently featured. For good measure, the VNR also mentions another product by the same company, which enjoys "a wide celebrity clientele." Unlike the other D S Simon VNRs described in this study, there is no verbal or on-screen client notification at the end of the Nelson's VNR.

Newsroom staff at KPTV-12 (Portland, OR) and CN8 (Philadelphia, PA) must have been asleep on the job, when edited and re-voiced versions of the VNR were included in the stations' newscasts. On September 15, 2006, a KPTV-12 anchor called Rescue Sleep "a natural alternative" that's "cheaper than prescription pills," with "no side effects. Plus ... Jennifer Aniston takes it, so it must be good." On September 21, a CN8 consumer reporter Janet Zappala added one caveat to a similarly promotional segment, stressing, "This is very important—it does contain 27 percent alcohol."

KPTV-12 aired the VNR as a "Need to Know" segment and CN8 as an "All About You" segment, again proving the irony of TV news branding efforts. Both segments were derived entirely from the Nelson's VNR. However, neither station made any attempt at disclosure.

In fact, CN8 has yet to disclose any VNR, though it aired four others described in this study, two from General Mills promoting Wheaties (page 61) and Bisquick (page 46), one from Trend Micro Software, (page 29) and one from Allstate (page 21).



Client: Nelson's Rescue Sleep
Released: September 2006
Aired By: 2 stations
Disclosed By: No stations



Original Nelson's Rescue Sleep VNR

Created by D S Simon Productions
Voiced by publicist



KPTV-12 9AM newscast

September 15, 2006
Re-voiced by station anchor

Quicktime video for the Nelson's Rescue Sleep VNR and the KPTV-12 newscast can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr54>

Nice Shirt, But Where's the Label?

WTIC-61 Tries Corporate VNR on for Size

On July 31, 2006, WTIC-61's "News at Ten" aired a 50-second story on the LifeShirt, a "super undershirt, of sorts" designed to monitor the vital signs of firefighters in action and capture physiological data such as heart rate, blood oxygen, respiration and temperature. The information collected can be used to establish safer rescue and training guidelines for first responders, and thus potentially save lives. The segment included positive testimony from Lt. Jim Eastwood of the Fairfield, CT Fire Department, plus several shots of the LifeShirt itself.

But what's good news for firefighters is bad journalism from WTIC-61. The FOX affiliate in Hartford, Connecticut built its entire story from a video news release (VNR) created by the broadcast PR firm Medialink Worldwide. The segment was funded by VivoMetrics Government Services, the privately-owned company that manufactures and distributes the LifeShirt worldwide. While the product had previously been limited to the pharmaceutical industry and academic researchers, VivoMetrics has expanded the use of their product to include firefighters, hazmat workers and military personnel.

In adapting the VNR, WTIC-61 edited the original video for length and replaced the narrative audio of the Medialink publicist with the voice of their own anchor. The station failed to cite VivoMetrics as the funding source of the story.

Responding to the Center for Media and Democracy's inquiries, WTIC-61 news director Bob Rockstroh said that the station generally avoided VNRs unless they contained crucial footage that editors couldn't get anywhere else. Even then, WTIC-61 policy dictates that all VNR materials are properly labeled with full sponsor identification. "In this case," said Rockstroh, "we screwed up."



Client: Vivometrics
Released: July 2006
Aired By: 1 station
Disclosed By: No stations



Original Vivometrics VNR

Created by Medialink
Voiced by publicist



WTIC-61 10PM newscast

July 31, 2006
Re-voiced by station anchor

Quicktime video for the Vivometrics VNR and the WTIC-61 newscast can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr49>

Bowls and Balls

Football's Flutie a Wheaties Flunky

It's true that no one would think a news segment on the "Wheaties Fit To Win Challenge" was investigative reporting. But viewers would not assume that every second of video in that segment came directly from a public relations firm hired by General Mills to promote its Wheaties brand cereal, either.

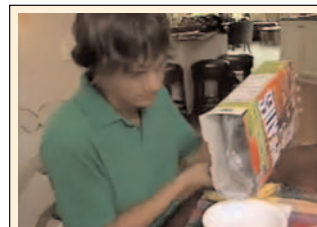
In September 2006, the broadcast PR firm Medialink Worldwide released a video news release (VNR) from General Mills titled, "Don't Be a Couch Potato." The VNR features soundbites from former pro quarterback Doug Flutie and nutritionist Jean Storlie. It also includes several shots of Wheaties brand cereal, as well as the General Mills "Fit to Win" website.

After stating that breakfast is the most important meal of the day, VNR narrator and Medialink publicist Mike Morris says, "Successful dieters—those who lose weight and keep it off—regularly eat breakfast." Both assertions have been challenged by nutritionists, who think that "it may be more healthful for adults to skip breakfast, as long as they eat carefully the rest of the day," as the *Los Angeles Times* reported on September 18, 2006.¹

Art Fennell apparently does not read the *Los Angeles Times*. One week after the newspaper ran its story disputing the value of breakfast, on September 26, the CN8 (Philadelphia, PA) news show "Art Fennell Reports" aired an edited and re-voiced version of the General Mills VNR.

"Ever wish you could work out with a pro athlete to really get the goods on what it takes to get and stay fit?" asked CN8 consumer reporter Janet Zappala. "Doug Flutie may be your man. He's heading up a web-based fitness program called the Wheaties Fit To Win Challenge." At the end of the segment, Zappala directed viewers to a General Mills website, www.wheaties.com.

On September 18, WUHF-31 (Rochester, NY) also aired an edited and re-voiced version of the General Mills VNR. The station's John Kucko did mention that Flutie is a "part-time pitch man for Wheaties," and when Flutie spoke, the on-screen identifier read, "Wheaties spokesman." Just in case viewers hadn't noticed the product being promoted, WUHF-31's Kucko appeared at the end of the segment, holding a box of the cereal. "Did you eat your Wheaties today?" he asked.



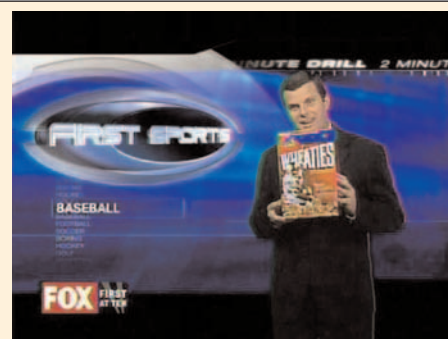
Client: General Mills
Released: September 2006
Aired By: 2 stations
Disclosed By: No stations



Original General Mills VNR
Created by Medialink
Voiced by publicist



CN8 10PM newscast
September 26, 2006
Re-voiced by station reporter



WUHF-31 10PM newscast
September 18, 2006
Re-voiced by station reporter

Quicktime video for the General Mills VNR and the newscasts for CN8 and WUHF-31 can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr56>

Viewers might well have asked if he had disclosed any VNRs being broadcast that day. The answer for both stations airing the General Mills VNR, WUHF-31 and CN8, is no.

Unfortunately, for CN8, that's par for the course. The station aired four other VNRs described in this study—from Nelson's Rescue Sleep (page 59), Trend Micro Software (page 29), Allstate (page 21) and, once again, General Mills (page 46)—all without disclosure.

Reference Links

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E! Gets an “F” For Non-Disclosure

Entertainment Network Pushes “Very Sexy Makeup” for Victoria’s Secret

It may be hard to believe, but it’s true: even cheesy entertainment news programs are subject to Federal Communications Commission regulations. And yet on September 22, 2006, the E! Entertainment Network broke the rules by blending a promotional video from Victoria’s Secret into their evening newscast, without any attribution.

The original video news release (VNR) was created by D S Simon Productions to promote Victoria’s Secret’s new “Very Sexy Makeup” collection. The two-minute video featured promotional soundbites (and numerous eye-candy shots) of supermodels Gisele Bundchen, Heidi Klum, Karolina Kurkova, Alessandra Ambrosio, Izabel Goulart and Selita Ebanks.

In adapting the VNR for its nightly “E! News” program, the network ran a heavily-edited version, using soundbites from Klum and Bundchen from additional video accompanying the pre-packaged segment. Additionally, “E! News” staff replaced the narrative of the D S Simon publicist with the voice of one of their own reporters. At no point did the network disclose to viewers the true funding source of the story.

The E! Entertainment Network is jointly-owned by Comcast and Disney.

In February 2006, the Center for Media and Democracy observed a previous Victoria’s Secret VNR (also from D S Simon) being used without attribution on “The Daily Buzz,” a nationally-syndicated morning news program.¹



Client: Victoria’s Secret
Released: September 2006
Aired By: 1 station
Disclosed By: No stations

Reference Links

1. <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/vnr29>



Original Victoria’s Secret VNR
Created by D S Simon Productions
Voiced by publicist



E! News 7PM broadcast
September 22, 2006
Re-voiced by station reporter

Quicktime video for the Victoria’s Secret VNR and the E! News broadcast can be found at
<http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/vnr58>



Findings—TV Stations

Listed here are the television stations that were observed airing video news releases (VNRs) between April 26 and October 26, 2006. For full information about each newsroom's use of VNRs, refer to the linked station list on the Center for Media and Democracy's website: http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/findings/TV_stations.

Stations marked with an asterisk (*) were also cited in April's "Fake TV News" report.

VNRs marked with a "1" were aired with clear disclosure of the funding source.

VNRs marked with a "2" were aired with brief or ambiguous disclosure of the funding source.

| Station | Network | Owner | City | State | VNRs | Client | Page |
|---------|---------------------|---------------------------|---------------|-------|------|-----------------------------------|----------|
| WAKA-8 | CBS | Bahakel Communications | Montgomery | AL | 1 | General Motors | 50 |
| KBAK-29 | CBS | Westwind Communications | Bakersfield | CA | 1 | Novartis | 48 |
| KCOP-13 | Fox / My Network | Fox/News Corporation | Los Angeles | CA | 2 | Oticon Novartis | 11 48 |
| KFMB-8 | CBS | Midwest Television | San Diego | CA | 1 | General Mills | 15 |
| KGO-7 | ABC | ABC/Disney | San Francisco | CA | 1 | Allstate | 41 |
| KGTV-10 | ABC | McGraw-Hill | San Diego | CA | 1 | CARFAX.com ² | 33 |
| KHSL-12 | CBS | Catamount Broadcast Group | Chico | CA | 1 | Allstate | 41 |
| XETV-6 | Fox | Grupo Televisa | San Diego | CA | 1 | Siemens | 54 |
| KUSA-9 | NBC | Gannett Broadcasting | Denver | CO | 1 | CARFAX.com | 33 |
| WTIC-61 | Fox | Tribune Broadcasting | Hartford | CT | 1 | Vivometrics | 60 |
| WFLA-8 | NBC | Media General, Inc. | Tampa | FL | 1 | American College of Physicians | 39 |
| WKMG-6 | CBS | Post-Newsweek Corporation | Orlando | FL | 1 | Old Mother Hubbard | 31 |
| WLTN-23 | Univision | Univision Communications | Miami | FL | 1 | Siemens | 58 |
| WSVN-7 | Fox | Sunbeam Television | Miami | FL | 1 | Barr Pharmaceuticals | 51 |
| KHON-2 | Fox | Montecito Broadcast Group | Honolulu | HI | 1 | General Mills | 15 |
| KMEG-14 | CBS | Waitt Media | Sioux City | IA | 1 | Oticon | 11 |
| WSBT-22 | CBS | Schurz Communications | South Bend | IN | 1 | American College of Physicians | 39 |
| KLFY-10 | CBS | Young Broadcasting | Lafayette | LA | 2 | Allstate General Motors | 47 53 |
| WBRZ-2* | ABC | Manship Media | Baton Rouge | LA | 1 | Siemens | 25 |
| WLVI-56 | WB | Tribune Broadcasting | Boston | MA | 1 | Oticon | 11 |
| KMSP-9 | Fox | Fox/News Corporation | Minneapolis | MN | 1 | General Motors | 19 |

| Station | Network | Owner | Market | State | VNRs | Clients | Page |
|----------------|------------|------------------------------|--------------|-------|------|---|------|
| KSFY-27 | Fox | Nexstar Broadcasting Group | Springfield | MO | 1 | Novartis | 48 |
| WDAF-4* | Fox | Fox/News Corporation | Kansas City | MO | 1 | General Motors | 43 |
| WTOK-11 | ABC | Gray Communications | Meridian | MS | 1 | TCS Daily | 9 |
| WCTI-12* | ABC | Lamco Communications | New Bern | NC | 1 | Companion Animal Parasite Council | 27 |
| NY1* | Cable | Time Warner | New York | NY | 1 | American College of Physicians ² | 23 |
| WPIX-11* | WB | Tribune Broadcasting | New York | NY | 1 | General Motors | 56 |
| WUHF-31 | Fox | Sinclair Broadcasting | Rochester | NY | 1 | General Mills | 61 |
| WCPO-9* | ABC | E.W. Scripps Company | Cincinnati | OH | 1 | CA ¹ | 35 |
| WDTN-2 | NBC | Lin TV Corporation | Dayton | OH | 1 | CARFAX.com ² | 33 |
| WSYX-6* | ABC | Sinclair Broadcasting | Columbus | OH | 1 | Novartis | 48 |
| WYTV-33* | ABC | Chelsey Broadcasting | Youngstown | OH | 1 | Advanced Medical Optics | 57 |
| KOIN-6 | CBS | Montecito Broadcast Group | Portland | OR | 1 | CA | 35 |
| KPTV-12 | Fox | Meredith Corporation | Portland | OR | 1 | Nelson's Rescue Sleep | 59 |
| CN8 | IND | Comcast Corporation | Philadelphia | PA | 5 | Nelson's Rescue Sleep | 59 |
| | | | | | | General Mills (Wheaties) | 61 |
| | | | | | | Trend Micro | 29 |
| | | | | | | Allstate | 21 |
| | | | | | | General Mills (Bisquick) | 46 |
| KYW-3* | CBS | Viacom | Philadelphia | PA | 1 | Barr Pharmaceuticals ¹ | 44 |
| WMGM-40 | NBC | Access.1 Communications | Philadelphia | PA | 1 | Matrixx Initiatives | 13 |
| WJAR-10 | NBC | Media General, Inc. | Providence | RI | 1 | GlaxoSmithKline | 37 |
| KSFY-13 | ABC | Wicks Television LLC | Sioux Falls | SD | 3 | Siemens | 17 |
| | | | | | | Matrixx Initiatives | 13 |
| | | | | | | American College of Physicians ² | 23 |
| WTNZ-43 | Fox | Raycom Media | Knoxville | TN | 1 | American College of Physicians | 39 |
| KLBK-13* | CBS | Nexstar Broadcasting | Lubbock | TX | 1 | Old Mother Hubbard | 31 |
| KVCT-19 | Fox | Saga Communications of Texas | Victoria | TX | 1 | Siemens | 25 |
| KXXV-25 | ABC | Centrex Television | Waco | TX | 1 | Oticon | 11 |
| ABC News | ABC | Walt Disney Company | National | | 1 | Barr Pharmaceuticals | 51 |
| First Business | Syndicated | Weigel Group | National | | 1 | Siemens | 17 |
| E! | Cable | Comcast/Disney | National | | 1 | Victoria's Secret | 63 |



Methodology

From April to October 2006, the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD) tracked television stations' use of video news releases (VNRs) from three major broadcast public relations firms: Medialink Worldwide,¹ MultiVu² and D S Simon Productions.³

Most VNRs were viewed via publicly-available websites, such as Medialink's "News Service" homepage,⁴ MultiVu's recent VNR listing,⁵ and video aggregators, such as Google's video search engine⁶ and video podcasts from the PR firms themselves. A few VNRs tracked in this study were obtained from websites requiring registration; CMD accessed these with the help of supportive news staff.

From the available pool of VNRs, CMD researchers selected pre-packaged, narrated segments that were produced for a range of clients and addressed a wide variety of topics. The goal was to track a representative subset of VNRs produced by the three PR firms over the course of the study. Over 26 weeks, CMD researchers selected 109 VNRs for tracking.

For each VNR tracked, CMD researchers identified soundbite speakers and words or phrases likely to be unique to newscast segments containing footage from the VNR. These terms were submitted to broadcast clipping services, which searched for the key terms among U.S. television broadcasts, generally over a period of 10 days to two weeks following the release of each VNR.

Search results were reviewed by CMD researchers, who compared each newscast segment to the original VNR. Of the 109 total VNRs tracked, CMD confirmed that 33 had been broadcast, in whole or in part, by TV stations.* Due to technical factors—for instance, the limitations of key term searches and of broadcast clipping services, which attempt to catalog the content of more than 1,600 U.S. television stations—it is likely that the results reported here do not include every TV station that aired one or more of the 109 VNRs tracked for this study.

For each instance of confirmed VNR usage, two CMD researchers independently reviewed the video and recorded:

- The TV station and the day and time of the VNR broadcast;
- Whether the VNR was aired in whole or in part;
- Whether the TV station used the publicist's original narration or re-voiced the segment (and, if re-voiced, how closely the station's narration followed the original VNR script);
- Whether the aired segment was entirely derived from the VNR or contained other video footage;
- Whether the newscast retained, neutralized or countered the VNR's promotional or persuasional message; and
- Whether the TV station made any attempt to disclose the nature or source of the VNR footage to viewers.

Every single VNR broadcast confirmed by CMD is reported in this study. For 45 of 54 confirmed VNR broadcasts** (or 83 percent of the total), CMD was able to obtain video of the newscast for posting online, along with the original VNR. This

study also contains written descriptions of all confirmed VNR broadcasts, including when and how the TV station used the VNR footage, and whether there was any disclosure to news audiences.

Lastly, CMD called the news director at every TV station cited, to ask about the particular VNR broadcast(s) by their station and about the station's policy on VNR use and disclosure. News director comments are included in the relevant article(s) on each VNR.

Reference Links

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3. http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=D_S_Simon_Productions
4. <http://www.us.medialink.com/#>
5. http://www.prnewswire.com/ma/ma/ma_media?last_item_found=0&page_num=1&page_size=20&media_code=VID&num_of_pages=0
6. <http://video.google.com/>

* Unlike CMD's April 2006 "Fake TV News" report, satellite media tour footage was excluded from the reported VNR search results.

** This study counts the nine ABC affiliate broadcasts of the same segment containing video from a Barr Laboratories VNR as one VNR broadcast, since the TV stations appear to have obtained the segment from a network news feed. The nine ABC affiliates that CMD documented airing the segment are listed in the VNR write-up, but are counted as one TV station (representing the originator of the segment) in this study's station tally.



Frequently Asked Questions

The following questions focus on video news release (VNR) disclosure and policy issues. For more basic information on what VNRs are, how VNRs differ from print press releases, and how television stations use VNRs, see “Fake TV News: Frequently Asked Questions”¹ and “Executive Summary” (page 5).

Why do TV stations air VNRs?

VNRs have become standard TV newsroom fare over the past two decades, in large part because increased economic and profit pressures on TV stations have led to reductions in newsroom staff and budgets. Under these circumstances, it is difficult for stations to fill news programs with their own material. These trends have been documented by academic researchers, Nielsen media surveys, and the Project for Excellence in Journalism’s annual “State of the News Media” reports. (See the “Staffing and Workload”² and the “Local TV: News Investment”³ sections of the State of the News Media 2006 report, along with “Fake TV News: Introduction.”⁴)

What’s wrong with TV stations airing VNRs?

VNRs are produced by public relations firms to insert their clients’ messages into TV newscasts. As the Center for Media and Democracy’s (CMD’s) two VNR reports show, this client-driven process results in the production of VNRs with little or no real news value, the incorporation of misleading or wrong information into VNRs (see pages 13 and 61), and the exclusion of important, relevant information that challenges or weakens clients’ messages (see pages 21 and 39). This last point has perhaps the most serious implications for news audiences, as TV stations commonly build an entire news segment from a single VNR—sometimes without even fact checking it.⁵

In short, VNRs are the result of a process that is antithetical to the rigorous, independent and skeptical approach taken by journalists. Of course, TV newsrooms are free to use VNR footage as they see fit, but should—for numerous reasons (see below)—*always* disclose when they do so.

Why should TV stations disclose when they air VNRs?

There are three main reasons why TV stations should clearly disclose all VNR footage. First, basic journalistic principles demand it. The Radio-Television News Directors Association’s (RTNDA’s) Code of Ethics directs journalists to “present the news with integrity and decency, avoiding real or perceived conflicts of interest.”⁶ RTNDA’s code on VNR usage states, “News managers and producers should clearly disclose the origin of information and label all material provided by corporate or other non-editorial sources.”⁷ As is documented in CMD’s two VNR reports, anything less than full disclosure misleads news audiences.

Second, TV stations are given free use of the public airwaves, in exchange for their promise to serve the “public interest, convenience and necessity,” as mandated by the Communications Act of 1934. The Federal Radio Commission explained what is known as the “public trustee” model of broadcasting by stating: “It is as if people of a community should own a station and turn it over to the best man [*sic*] in sight with this injunction: ‘Manage this station in our interest.’”⁸ The covert inclusion of VNRs in TV newscasts clearly works against the public interest, since viewers are denied the information needed to evaluate the claims being presented as news.

Third, the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) wrote, in its unanimously-issued April 2005 Public Notice on VNRs, that “whenever broadcast stations and cable operators air VNRs, licensees and operators generally must clearly disclose to members of their audiences the nature, source and sponsorship of the material that they are viewing.”⁹

How should TV stations disclose when they air VNRs?

The FCC has not yet clarified what constitutes a “clear” disclosure of “the nature, source and sponsorship” of VNR footage (see above). RTNDA suggests that, for example, “graphics could denote ‘Mercy Hospital video’ and the reporter or anchor script could also acknowledge it by stating, ‘This operating room video was provided by Mercy Hospital.’”¹⁰

CMD suggests that “all provided and/or sponsored video footage ... be required to carry a continuous, frame-by-frame visual notification of its source,” as is described in “Fake TV News: Recommendations.”¹¹ Continuous labeling ensures that viewers do not miss or misconstrue the disclosure. This report contains two examples where on-screen labels were too ambiguous and/or brief for reasonable viewers to discern the sponsored nature of the segment. (see pages 23 and 33).

Why don’t most TV stations disclose when they air VNRs?

This question can only be fully answered by the TV stations themselves. Many stations cited in the “Fake TV News” report said that mistakes or confusion led to their airing VNRs without disclosure.¹² This is one reason why CMD suggests that continuous, on-screen client notifications be added *before* VNRs are uploaded to digital news feeds or otherwise distributed to stations. However, the very low rate of VNR disclosure observed by CMD suggests that there are other factors, such as TV newsroom staff not wanting to admit that a “report” was actually funded by and scripted for the very subject of that segment.

Isn’t it a TV station’s right to decide whether to air a VNR?

Yes. CMD has never called for the censorship or banning of VNRs, just for disclosure. Disclosure does not keep TV stations from airing VNRs—or PR firms from producing VNRs for paying clients. Disclosure simply ensures against the wholesale deception and manipulation of news audiences. In addition, disclosure is more speech, not less, and so can hardly be an abridgment of First Amendment rights. Lastly, as noted above, TV stations are regulated industries benefiting from the free use of the public airwaves.

What is the Federal Communications Commission’s role?

The FCC is a U.S. government agency “charged with regulating interstate and international communications by radio, television, wire, satellite and cable,” according to its website.¹³ The Communications Act of 1934, which established the FCC, also contains sponsorship identification rules for broadcasters (see below).

What are the FCC regulations that apply to VNRs?

The Communications Act of 1934 (specifically, sections 317 and 507 of the Act) contains sponsorship identification rules for broadcasters.¹⁴ The Act was written before television existed, let alone VNRs, and neither the FCC nor Congress has yet clarified exactly how it applies to VNRs. However, the FCC did state that “whenever broadcast stations and cable operators air VNRs, licensees and operators generally must clearly disclose to members of their audiences the nature, source and sponsorship of the material,” in its April 2005 Public Notice.¹⁵

Don't the FCC regulations only apply to "controversial or political" VNRs, or VNRs that TV stations are paid to air?

No. The FCC's April 2005 Public Notice made it perfectly clear that the regulations are in effect "whenever broadcast stations and cable operators air VNRs." It also states that "listeners and viewers are entitled to know who seeks to persuade them with the programming offered over broadcast stations and cable systems."

While the Communications Act singles out material provided by outside parties that stations are paid to broadcast, and provided material dealing with controversial or political issues, that does not mean that disclosure is only required of VNRs meeting one of those three conditions. There is, however, a "greater obligation of disclosure" for "political material and program matter dealing with controversial issues," again according to the FCC's Public Notice.

The Public Notice also states that "a duty of disclosure" is placed on "any person involved in the production or preparation of broadcast matter" who receives or provides "money, service, or other valuable consideration." This obviously covers PR firms paid to produce VNRs. The PR firms' disclosure must be relayed to TV stations, who then "must air the [disclosure] announcement, as if the consideration was paid to the station for airing the broadcast matter, even if the station itself received no such consideration."

How did the FCC react to the Center for Media and Democracy's "Fake TV News" report?

After an initial review of the report, the FCC launched an official investigation, sending letters of inquiry to the owners of all 77 TV stations cited in CMD's report. The letters were sent in mid-August 2006, and requested video footage of the segments in question, along with "copies of any agreements between the stations and the companies, government agencies or public relations firms involved in supplying the video news releases," reported *Bloomberg News*. The stations were given 60 days to respond. As the FCC does not comment on ongoing investigations, no other information has yet been made public.

How did other groups react to CMD's "Fake TV News" report?

Hours after the "Fake TV News" report was released, RTNDA issued a statement "strongly urg[ing] station management to review and strengthen their policies requiring complete disclosure of any outside material used in news programming."¹⁶ RTNDA president Barbara Cochran later wrote that "the similarities between newscast stories and VNRs were embarrassing."¹⁷ The Society of Professional Journalists' ethics committee co-chair said that CMD "deserves credit and thanks for once again bringing this deplorable practice to public attention."¹⁸ The report was widely covered, including by the *New York Times*, CNN, NPR, PBS and Pacifica News.

More recently, RTNDA decided to attack the "Fake TV News" report. In October 2006, RTNDA filed an appeal asking the FCC to halt its VNR investigation.¹⁹ (That does not appear likely to happen; an FCC official told Reuters the agency is "duty-bound to look into complaints.") The filing, prepared for RTNDA by a law and lobby firm, alleged that CMD's report was "biased and inaccurate" and "rife with unsubstantiated accusations and misleading half-truths."²⁰ CMD fully rebutted RTNDA's claims.²¹ Nonetheless, RTNDA has yet to retract or correct its critique of the report, and broadcast PR firms continue to refer to the critique, as though it had merit.²²

Does anyone oppose VNR disclosure requirements?

As might be expected, the broadcast PR firms that produce VNRs are promoting industry self-regulation and questioning the need for any FCC investigation or action. In October 2006, 15 firms announced the formation of a new VNR industry

consortium called the National Association of Broadcast Communicators (NABC), which has issued joint statements with the Public Relations Society of America. The RTNDA, as noted above, also objects to the FCC investigation. The timing and similarity of the RTNDA and NABC filings suggest that the groups are coordinating their advocacy on the issue, as do statements by NABC members and previous joint appearances by RTNDA and PR executives, to oppose legislation seeking disclosure of government VNRs.²³

There is at least one other group that has cautioned against FCC involvement. The Society of Professional Journalists urged “broadcast companies to set their own house in order by using extreme caution and full disclosure when airing VNRs.”²⁴ However, this position fails to acknowledge TV stations’ utter failure to police themselves on this matter, even though undisclosed VNRs have repeatedly emerged as a contentious issue since at least the early 1990s. (See “The Professional Opposition” section of “Fake TV News: Recommendations.”)²⁵

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