

Fake TV News: Widespread and Undisclosed

By Diane Farsetta

Created 03/16/2006 - 14:30

*Diane Farsetta and Daniel Price, Center for Media and Democracy
April 6, 2006*

This report includes:

- [Video footage](#) [1] of the 36 video news releases documented in this report, plus footage showing how actual TV newscasts incorporated them and/or a related satellite media tours.
- [A map](#) [2] showing the locations of the 77 television stations throughout the United States that aired this fake news.

In Brief

Over a ten-month period, the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD) documented television newsrooms' use of 36 [video news releases](#) [3] (VNRs)—a small sample of the thousands produced each year. CMD identified 77 television stations, from those in the largest to the smallest markets, that aired these VNRs or related [satellite media tours](#) [4] (SMTs) in 98 separate instances, without disclosure to viewers. Collectively, these 77 stations reach more than half of the U.S. population. The VNRs and SMTs whose broadcast CMD documented were produced by three broadcast PR firms for 49 different clients, including General Motors, Intel, Pfizer and Capital One. In each case, these 77 television stations actively disguised the sponsored content to make it appear to be their own reporting. In almost all cases, stations failed to balance the clients' messages with independently-gathered footage or basic journalistic research. More than one-third of the time, stations aired the pre-packaged VNR in its entirety.

Report highlights include:



[KOKH-25](#) [5] airs a [VNR](#) [6] from [Intel](#) [7]

- [KOKH-25](#) [8] in Oklahoma City, OK, a [FOX](#) [9] station owned by [Sinclair](#) [10], aired six of the VNRs tracked by CMD, making it this report's top repeat offender. Consistently, KOKH-25 failed to provide any disclosure to news audiences. The station also aired five of the six VNRs in their entirety, and kept the publicist's original narration each time.
- In three instances, TV stations not only aired entire VNRs without disclosure, but had local anchors and reporters read directly from the script prepared by the broadcast PR firm. [KTVI-2](#) [11] in St. Louis, MO, had their anchor introduce, and their reporter re-voice, a [VNR](#) [12] produced for Masterfoods and 1-800 Flowers, following the script nearly verbatim. [WBFS-33](#) [13] in Miami, FL, did the same with a [VNR](#) [14] produced for the "professional services firm" Towers Perrin. And [Ohio News Network](#) [15] did likewise with a [VNR](#) [16] produced for Siemens.
- [WSJV-28](#) [17] in South Bend, IN, introduced a [VNR](#) [18] produced for General Motors as being from "FOX's Andrew Schmertz," implying that Schmertz was a reporter for the local station or the FOX network. In reality, he is a [publicist](#) [19] at the largest U.S. broadcast PR firm, [Medialink Worldwide](#) [20]. Another Medialink [publicist](#) [21], Kate Brookes, was presented as an on-air reporter by four TV stations airing a [VNR](#) [22] produced for Siemens.
- Two stations whose previous use of government VNRs was documented by the *New York Times*, [WCIA-3](#) [23] in Champaign, IL, and [WHBQ-13](#) [24] in Memphis, TN, also [aired](#) [25] [VNRs](#) [26] tracked by CMD. The March 2005 *Times* article reported that WHBQ's vice president for news "could not explain how his station came to broadcast" a State Department VNR, while WCIA's news director said that Agriculture Department VNRs "meet our journalistic standards."

Summary

Although the number of media formats and outlets has exploded in recent years, television remains the dominant news source in the United States. More than three-quarters of U.S. adults rely on local TV news, and more than 70 percent turn to network TV or cable news on a daily or near-daily basis, according to a January 2006 [Harris Poll](#) [27]. The quality and integrity of television reporting thus significantly impacts the public's ability to evaluate everything from consumer products to medical services to government policies.

To reach this audience—and to add a veneer of credibility to clients' messages—the public relations industry uses video news releases (VNRs). VNRs are pre-packaged "news" segments and additional footage created by broadcast PR firms, or by publicists within corporations or government agencies. VNRs are designed to be seamlessly integrated into newscasts, and are freely provided to TV stations. Although the

accompanying information sent to TV stations identifies the clients behind the VNRs, nothing in the material for broadcast does. Without strong disclosure requirements and the attention and action of TV station personnel, viewers cannot know when the news segment they're watching was bought and paid for by the very subjects of that "report."



WE GET YOU ON TELEVISION

From an ad for the broadcast PR firm D S Simon Productions [28]

In recent years, the U.S. Congress, the Federal Communications Commission, journalism professors, reporters and members of the general public have expressed concern about VNRs. In response, public relations executives and broadcaster groups have vigorously defended the status quo, claiming there is no problem with current practices. In June 2005, the president of the Radio-Television News Directors Association [29] (RTNDA), Barbara Cochran [30], told a reporter that VNRs were "kind of like the Loch Ness Monster [31]. Everyone talks about it, but not many people have actually seen it."

To inform this debate, the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD) conducted a ten-month study of selected VNRs and their use by television stations, tracking 36 VNRs issued by three broadcast PR firms. Key findings include:

- **VNR use is widespread.** CMD found 69 TV stations that aired at least one VNR from June 2005 to March 2006—a significant number, given that CMD was only able to track a small percentage of the VNRs streaming into newsrooms during that time. Collectively, these 69 stations broadcast to 52.7 percent of the U.S. population, according to Nielsen Media [32] figures. Syndicated [33] and network-distributed [34] segments sometimes included VNRs, further broadening their reach.
- **VNRs are aired in TV markets of all sizes.** TV stations often use VNRs to limit the costs associated with producing, filming and editing their own reports. However, VNR usage is not limited to small-town stations with shoestring budgets. Nearly two-thirds of the VNRs that CMD tracked were aired by stations in a Top 50 Nielsen market area, such as Detroit, Pittsburgh or Cincinnati. Thirteen VNRs were broadcast in the ten largest markets, including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia and Boston.

- **TV stations don't disclose VNRs to viewers.** Of the 87 VNR broadcasts that CMD documented, not once did the TV station disclose the client(s) behind the VNR to the news audience. Only one station, WHSV-3 [35] in Harrisonburg, VA, provided partial disclosure [36], identifying the broadcast PR firm that created the VNR, but not the client, Daimler Chrysler. WHSV-3 aired soundbites from a Chrysler representative and directed viewers to websites associated with Chrysler, without disclosing the company's role in the "report."
- **TV stations disguise VNRs as their own reporting.** In every VNR broadcast that CMD documented, the TV station altered the VNR's appearance. Newsrooms added station-branded graphics and overlays, to make VNRs indistinguishable from reports that genuinely originated from their station. A station reporter or anchor re-voiced the VNR in more than 60 percent of the VNR broadcasts, sometimes repeating the publicist's original narration word [37]-for [38]-word [39].
- **TV stations don't supplement VNR footage or verify VNR claims.** While TV stations often edit VNRs for length, in only seven of the 87 VNR broadcasts documented by CMD did stations add any independently-gathered footage or information to the segment. In all other cases, the entire aired "report" was derived from a VNR and its accompanying script. In 31 of the 87 VNR broadcasts, the entire aired "report" was the entire pre-packaged VNR. Three stations (WCPO-9 [40] in Cincinnati, OH; WSYR-9 [41] in Syracuse, NY; and WYTV-33 [42] in Youngstown, OH) removed safety warnings [43] from a VNR touting a newly-approved prescription skin cream. WSYR-9 also aired a VNR heralding [44] a "major health breakthrough" for arthritis sufferers—a supplement that a widely-reported government study had found to be little better than a placebo.
- **The vast majority of VNRs are produced for corporate clients.** Of the hundreds of VNRs that CMD reviewed for potential tracking, only a few came from government agencies or non-profit organizations. Corporations have consistently been the dominant purveyors of VNRs, though the increased scrutiny of government-funded VNRs in recent years may have decreased their use by TV newsrooms. Of the VNRs that CMD tracked, 47 of the 49 clients behind them were corporations [45] that stood to benefit financially from the favorable "news" coverage.
- **Satellite media tours may accompany VNRs.** Broadcast PR firms sometimes produce both VNRs and satellite media tours (SMTs) for clients. SMTs are actual interviews with TV stations, but their focus and scope are determined by the clients. In effect, SMTs are live recitations of VNR scripts. CMD identified 10 different TV stations that aired SMTs for 17 different clients with related VNRs. In only one instance was there partial disclosure [46] to viewers. An anchor at WLTX-19 [47] in Columbia, SC, said after the segment, "This interview ... was

provided by vendors at the consumer trade show," but did not name the four corporate clients behind the SMT.

In sum, television newscasts—the most popular news source in the United States—frequently air VNRs without disclosure to viewers, without conducting their own reporting, and even without fact checking the claims made in the VNRs. VNRs are overwhelmingly produced for corporations [48], as part of larger public relations campaigns to sell products, burnish their image, or promote policies or actions beneficial to the corporation.

Fake TV News: Introduction

The public expects, rightly, that "news" is information that has been gathered and verified by a journalist acting as a fair observer. A fair observer may have opinions or a point of view, but he or she avoids—or at least fully discloses—any potential, perceived or real conflict of interest.

"[Fake news](#)" occurs when public relations practitioners adopt the practices and/or appearance of journalists in order to insert marketing or other persuasive messages into news media. While fake news is obviously bad news, it's very good PR. For example, praise for Brand X has much more credibility when it's relayed by a [seemingly-independent](#) reporter or commentator in a news setting, rather than an actor in a commercial.

The dominant form of "fake TV news" is the [video news release](#) (VNR). VNRs are pre-packaged "news" segments and additional footage created by broadcast PR firms, or by publicists within corporations or government agencies. A VNR presents a client's message, using a format and tone that mimic actual TV news. Nothing in the material for broadcast identifies the PR firm—or, more importantly, the paying client or clients—behind the VNR.

VNRs are just one of many deceptive PR techniques. Yet, they represent a particular and substantial threat to the modern information environment. A closer examination of the broadcast PR industry and a major reason for its influence—the downsizing of television newsrooms—illustrates the nature of this threat. However, U.S. policy regarding VNRs is limited and is neither actively enforced nor informed by current practices. (Policy issues are detailed in the "[Recommendations](#)" section of this report.)

News for Sale

While VNRs have existed for decades, recent reports indicate the pervasive nature of corporate and government campaigns to manipulate news media in other ways. Contracts, payments, grants, goods and services have been offered to pundits, columnists and media outlets, to ensure favorable coverage.

The Bush administration has given government contracts or grants to at least [three conservative pundits](#); none disclosed the payments to their audiences. *USA Today's* Greg Toppo outed the most infamous "payola pundit," [Armstrong Williams](#), in January 2005. Working under the auspices of the public relations firm [Ketchum](#), Williams received a \$240,000 contract to promote policies for the U.S. [Department of Education](#).

Investigations of indicted lobbyist [Jack Abramoff](#) uncovered [two columnists](#) associated with [think tanks](#) who had secretly been paid to write favorably about Abramoff's clients. [Doug Bandow's](#) and [Peter Ferrara's](#) columns "provided a seemingly independent validation of the arguments the Abramoff team were using to try to sway Congressional action," noted *BusinessWeek* reporter Eamon Javers in December 2005. Ferrara's boss said, "I have a sense that there are a lot of people at think tanks who have similar arrangements."

As he was writing his 2003 book *BioEvolution*, columnist [Michael Fumento](#) received an undisclosed [\\$60,000 grant](#) from [Monsanto](#), "a frequent subject of praise in Fumento's opinion columns," as well as the book, reported Javers in January 2006. FOX News commentator [Steven Milloy](#) received [payments](#) from [Philip Morris](#) as recently as 2001, even as his FOX columns dismissed the dangers of secondhand smoke, revealed Paul D. Thacker in *The New Republic*.

The Los Angeles television station [KTLA-5](#) promised "[favorable coverage](#)" to companies, for such undisclosed perks as a free stay in a luxury hotel and spa for three anchors, and "a customized dining-room makeover worth more than \$10,000" for one anchor, California newspapers reported in early 2006. (KTLA-5 is one of [77 stations](#) that this report documents [airing fake news](#).) The previous year, the San Francisco-based project "Grade the News" revealed that [two area papers](#) were rewarding advertisers and soliciting new ad accounts with favorable restaurant reviews.

Be the Media

Recent examples of interested parties paying to produce and place their own "news" in seemingly-independent outlets also abound.

The Pentagon first [distanced itself](#) from, and then quietly gave its [assent to](#), a covert propaganda program where the PR firm [Lincoln Group](#) paid Iraqi newspapers to [run stories](#) written by U.S. information operations troops. The articles, usually presented as the work of Iraqi journalists, include "only one side of events and omit information that might reflect poorly on the U.S. or Iraqi governments," *Los Angeles Times* reporters Mark Mazzetti and Borzou Daragahi wrote in November 2005.

The U.S. government has also targeted domestic audiences with fake news, under the current [Bush](#) and former [Clinton](#) administrations. "At least 20 federal agencies ... have made and distributed hundreds of television news segments in the past few years," *New York Times* reporters David Barstow and Robin Stein [wrote in](#) March 2005. Even when government VNRs addressed controversial issues like Medicare reform and the U.S.

invasion of Iraq, "many were subsequently broadcast on local stations across the country without any acknowledgment of the government's role."

The administration of California Governor [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) produced and distributed at least four VNRs, none of which disclosed their source to news audiences. [One VNR](#), uncovered by the *Sacramento Bee* and *Los Angeles Times* in February 2005, promoted proposed changes to labor regulations and was narrated by a former reporter. In December 2005, a Sacramento Superior Court judge ruled that the Schwarzenegger VNRs [had undermined](#) "the public's ability to participate in the rule-making process."

Lastly, Grade the News has documented San Francisco television stations airing VNRs. These VNRs were not funded by clients, but provided via subscription services. In September 2003, Grade the News' Michael Stoll caught KNTV-11 airing at least [three VNRs](#) from NewsProNet, which provides canned TV, radio and online "news" reports. In March 2006, Stoll reported that many of the "Medical Journal" segments on KGO-7 were derived [from VNRs](#) from Ivanhoe Broadcast News, which provides medical and consumer segments to more than 250 TV stations across the country.

The Fake TV News Business

The broadcast PR industry, which pioneered the use of VNRs and is responsible for much of today's fake TV news, is both pervasive and secretive. In its April 2005 issue, the trade publication *O'Dwyer's PR Services Report* listed 49 U.S. broadcast PR firms. Nearly all offer assistance with some aspect of VNR production, distribution and/or tracking. Many manufacture other forms of fake news as well, such as [audio news releases](#)—the radio equivalent of VNRs—or [satellite media tours](#) (SMTs)—television "interviews" whose focus and scope are determined by clients, making them little more than live recitations of VNR scripts.

Television newsrooms' use of VNRs appears to be universal. Nielsen studies in 1992, 1996 and 2001 found that 100 percent of stations surveyed aired VNRs. In 2003, the chair of the major broadcast PR firm [Medialink Worldwide](#) said, "Every television station in America with a newscast has used and probably uses regularly this material from corporations and organizations that we provide." The [website](#) of another firm, [KEF Media Associates](#), claims, "The good news is there's more demand today than ever before for quality video news releases."

Although the broadcast PR industry is large and influential, there's not much information available on it. The March 2005 *New York Times* report noted that Medialink Worldwide "produces and distributes about 1,000 video news releases a year, most commissioned by major corporations." An academic study from December 2000 also credited Medialink with one thousand VNRs annually, "roughly double the number of its nearest competitor." That study, by Mark Harmon and Candace White at the University of Tennessee, estimated, "A typical newsroom may have ten to fifteen VNRs available per day." In September 1990, the magazine of the Society of Professional Journalists estimated that "5,000 to 15,000 VNRs are distributed each year."

After producing a VNR for a client, broadcast PR firms distribute and promote it. Medialink's [2003 annual report](#) claims that its clients' VNRs, audio news releases and print materials "reach more than 11,000 newsrooms" and "more than 11,000 online multimedia newsrooms." Most VNRs are distributed to television newsrooms via satellite feed. Some are relayed by the video feeds of news companies, such as CBS, FOX, CNN and Associated Press. As far as promoting VNRs, the firm [D S Simon Productions](#) promises "[300 targeted pitch calls](#) to broadcast networks, network affiliate news feeds, national cable outlets, regional cable networks, and syndicated shows, as well as local network affiliates and independent TV stations."

The broadcast PR industry's standard for disclosure is to identify the client(s) behind a VNR in the opening and/or closing slates—frames not intended for broadcast—and in emails and/or faxes to newsrooms. Broadcast PR firm executives have made clear that they assume no responsibility for a subsequent lack of disclosure to news audiences. In a June 2005 [comment](#) to the [Federal Communications Commission](#), the [Public Relations Society of America](#) even warned that stronger disclosure requirements "could have a chilling effect on open communication and work against providing the public with vital, interesting information."

Hard Times for Real News

Why are television newsrooms so amenable to fake news? The main reason is that they lack the resources to fill news programs with real reporting.

"From 1998 to 2002, a study of 33,911 television reports found, the percentage of 'feed' material from third-party sources rose to 23 percent of all reports from 14 percent," Project for Excellence in Journalism director Tom Rosenstiel and political science professor Marion Just [wrote](#) in March 2005. "Meanwhile, the percentage of stories that included a local correspondent fell to 43 percent from 62 percent. Local broadcasters are being asked to do more with less, and they have been forced to rely more on prepackaged news to take up the slack."

TV network news is shaped by two trends, both harmful to news quality: the number of reporters is decreasing, and the workload per reporter is increasing. Research by Joe Foote at Arizona State University found that the number of reporters in TV network newsrooms had decreased by more than one-third, from 1985 to 2002. Over the same time frame, reporters increased their output by ten stories per year. Andrew Tyndall at ADT Research, a New York firm that monitors TV newscasts, reports that TV network newsrooms had an average of 51 reporters filing 35 stories a year in 1996, while in 2005 there were 44 reporters filing 39 stories.

Meanwhile, many local TV newsrooms have seen their budgets increase in recent years—but not by enough to fill new and expanded news programs. "One of the major issues ... has been the trend towards stations' producing more news without increasing their staff," the Project for Excellence in Journalism [wrote](#) in its [State of the News Media](#)

[2006](#) report. "Stations did fewer reporter packages and less original reporting and enterprise, relying more on second-hand material."

In March 2006, Gail Schiller reported for *Reuters* that "increased competition and pressure on advertising revenue" are prompting television stations to contact "[product placement](#), media and [branded entertainment](#) agencies," to [integrate clients' products](#) "into news programming in exchange for buying commercial time or paying integration fees." Disclosure of such arrangements is generally limited to a brief announcement or a line in the end-of-show credits. Schiller wrote, "At present, full-fledged brand integration into news programming appears to be limited to local news, but some marketing experts suspect that the network morning news shows won't be far behind."

Television newsrooms' increased emphasis on profits and decreased emphasis on reporting mean more business for broadcast PR firms, who are more than happy to fill news holes with VNRs and SMTs. But these trends also result in an increasingly compromised news environment. Three-quarters of U.S. residents surveyed for a [June 2005 report](#) by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press felt that news media were most concerned with "attracting the biggest audience," while less than one-fifth of respondents felt news media cared most about "informing the public."

Broadcasters are granted use of the public airwaves, in return for serving "the [needs and interests](#) of the communities" in which they operate. But when sponsored segments like VNRs and SMTs are presented to unsuspecting viewers as "news," the only interests served are those of the broadcast PR firms' clients. In addition to betraying the public trust, TV newsrooms airing fake news without disclosure are plagiarists.

Fake TV News: Recommendations

In Brief

The Center for Media and Democracy recommends that:

1. All provided and/or sponsored video footage be required to carry a continuous, frame-by-frame visual notification of its source.
2. All provided and/or sponsored audio material be required to include a verbal notification at its beginning and/or end, disclosing its source.
3. Broadcasters be required to place in their public file a monthly report on their use of provided and/or sponsored material.
4. U.S. government agencies funding and/or producing video or audio for news broadcast be required to make all such material public and archive it online.

Introduction

Healthy democracies require the participation of informed citizens. In the United States, more people get their information [from television](#) than from any other form of news media.

As this report [documents](#), TV newsrooms routinely present [video news releases](#) (VNRs) as though they are their own, independently researched reports. TV stations' consistent failure to disclose VNRs to news audiences means that even the most media savvy people aren't able to evaluate the quality or integrity of TV news.

Currently, news audiences are faced with one of two bad options. One option is to assume that any—and perhaps many—of the TV news reports they view were actually funded, filmed and scripted by undisclosed parties, most likely [corporations](#) seeking to boost their profits. The other option is to assume that the widespread and undisclosed use of VNRs does not impact the quality or integrity of TV news.

There is one good potential future option, though. Taking into consideration TV newsrooms' use of VNRs, the U.S. [Federal Communications Commission](#) (FCC) could strengthen and actively enforce disclosure requirements. Then and only then, news audiences could reasonably assume that broadcasters will inform them when provided and/or sponsored content is aired, and tell them who the client(s) behind the segment are.

Current Disclosure Requirements

Over the past few years, the debate over disclosure has focused on VNRs from the U.S. federal government.

The nonpartisan investigative arm of Congress, the Government Accountability Office (GAO), has [ruled repeatedly](#) that any government VNR that does not make its source clear to news audiences constitutes illegal [covert propaganda](#). The Bush administration's [Justice Department](#) and [Office of Management and Budget](#) have dismissed that standard, instead claiming that government VNRs are permissible, as long as they are "informational." (Measures passed by the U.S. Congress require "a clear notification" for government VNRs, without defining what that means.)

With regard to this unresolved debate, FCC Commissioner [Jonathan Adelstein](#) wrote, "The surprising thing, though, is nobody bothered to mention that there are separate disclosure requirements enforced by the FCC under the Communications Act." As summarized in the FCC's [April 2005 Public Notice](#), these rules say 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."

The FCC issued the Public Notice in response to concerns that "broadcast licensees and cable operators may have aired VNRs with news stories containing material paid for, prepared and/or provided to them by or on behalf of commercial, governmental and other entities without disclosing, at the time of the airing, the source of and the circumstances surrounding their acquisition of such material." In the Notice, the FCC asserts that "listeners and viewers are entitled to know who seeks to persuade them."

Current FCC rules mandate disclosure when "any money, service, or other valuable consideration is directly or indirectly paid, or promised to or charged or accepted" by television stations airing VNRs or by radio stations airing [audio news releases](#) (ANRs). A more stringent disclosure requirement is applied when the provided broadcast material deals with "political or controversial" issues.

However, Commissioner Adelstein told the [U.S. Senate commerce committee](#) in May 2005 that, in practice, FCC enforcement of these rules is limited to responding to complaints. This puts news audiences in a Catch-22 situation. How can they know to file a complaint, when TV stations fail to disclose VNRs and actively disguise the segments as their own reporting?

Recommendations

Taking into consideration the FCC's stated intent and TV newsrooms' actual use of VNRs, as documented in this report, the Center for Media and Democracy recommends that:

1. All provided and/or sponsored video footage—including VNR prepackaged "news" segments, additional soundbites and other [B-roll](#) footage, pre-recorded interviews, and [satellite media tours](#)—be required to carry a continuous, frame-by-frame visual notification of its source. If the client(s) who funded the video and the producer and/or distributor are different, it is the client(s) who must be disclosed to news audiences. Broadcasters must not be allowed to remove or obscure the notification, under any conditions.

Ideally, the notification (for example, the words "Footage provided by X") would be added by the broadcast PR firm or other entity producing the video. Adding this notification prior to distribution would avoid confusion and assist resource-strapped TV newsrooms. This policy would also eliminate the need for an arbiter to decide which topics are "political" or "controversial."

This policy would also recognize the considerable monetary value that free broadcast material represents to newsrooms. "Because of the high cost of compiling video for a newscast," [reasoned](#) the director of George Washington University's journalism program, "stations that accept outside video are in effect accepting an in-kind contribution from that source." The value of that in-kind contribution is difficult to calculate. However, *Broadcasting & Cable* [reported](#) in March 2005 that the chair of [Medialink Worldwide](#), the largest U.S. broadcast PR

firm, estimated "the price tag for a three-minute news vignette" as being \$15,000 to \$25,000. Thus, airing just part of one VNR represents an in-kind contribution worth thousands of dollars to a TV station.

2. All provided and/or sponsored audio material—including ANR prepackaged "news" segments, additional soundbites, pre-recorded interviews, and radio media tours—be required to include a verbal notification at its beginning and/or end, disclosing its source. As described above, the client(s) who funded the audio must be disclosed to news audiences. Broadcasters should only be allowed to remove pre-recorded notifications if a station anchor repeats the same information, before and/or after airing the provided and/or sponsored audio.
3. Broadcasters be required to place in their public file a monthly report on their use of provided and/or sponsored material, listing the days and times all such segments were aired, the title or subject matter of each segment, the entity that provided each segment to the station, the client(s) that funded each segment, and whether the broadcaster received any consideration to air each segment. These monthly reports must remain publicly available for a minimum of ten years.
4. U.S. government agencies funding and/or producing video or audio for news broadcast be required to make all such material public and archive it online, for a minimum of ten years. State, county and local governments funding and/or producing video or audio for news broadcast should be encouraged to maintain similar online public archives.

The Professional Opposition

Undisclosed VNRs—and controversies around them—are [not new](#). In 1991, Consumers Union released a report called, "Are Video News Releases Blurring the Line Between News and Advertising?" In 1992, *TV Guide* ran a cover story on VNRs titled "Fake News." In an accompanying editorial, *TV Guide* suggested that "when a TV news organization includes film or tape prepared by an outside source in a broadcast, the label 'VIDEO SUPPLIED BY [COMPANY OR GROUP NAME]' should be visible for as long as the material is on screen."

Why haven't disclosure policies and practices already been strengthened, then? Much of the credit—or shame, depending on your view—goes to public relations executives, who are experts at shaping public perception and policy.

Following the 1992 *TV Guide* story, the [Public Relations Society of America](#) (PRSA) promoted a voluntary "Code of Good Practice for Video News Releases." The chair of [Medialink Worldwide](#) explained at the time, "When you see a potential problem, whether real or imagined, you respond. We're taking a page right out of the [crisis management](#) textbooks."

In 2004, after the GAO found some government VNRs to be covert propaganda, PRSA suggested that publicists [not use](#) the word "reporting" in VNR sign-offs. In June 2005, PRSA called for "vigorous [self-regulation](#) by all those involved at every level in the

production and dissemination of prepackaged broadcast materials." (Ironically, PRSA commissioned [a poll](#) of corporate executives, Congressional staffers, and members of the general public in mid-2005 which found that seventy to ninety percent of each group surveyed [supported government action](#) to ensure disclosure of all VNRs.)

But PR executives aren't the only people trying to avoid stronger disclosure policies. The [Radio-Television News Directors Association](#) (RTNDA), comprised of broadcast, cable and electronic journalists, asserts that there is no disclosure problem. The association took a page from the PRSA playbook, issuing [new guidelines](#) for VNR use following the March 2005 *New York Times* [article](#) on government VNRs. In June 2005, the RTNDA told the FCC that an "[informal survey](#)" of its members had confirmed their adherence to the association's voluntary disclosure standards. Shortly afterwards, RTNDA president [Barbara Cochran](#) compared VNRs to the Loch Ness Monster, [telling](#) the *Washington Times*, "Everyone talks about it, but not many people have actually seen it."

Since opposition to meaningful disclosure policies is likely to continue, the following is a list of arguments that PR executives and broadcast associations have already made, or are likely to make, followed by the Center for Media and Democracy's (CMD's) brief rebuttals:

- *"The voluntary codes of conduct already in place are sufficient."* Of the 98 fake TV news broadcasts that CMD [documented](#), not once did the TV station disclose the client(s) behind the segment. Moreover, newsrooms actively disguised the VNRs they aired as their own reports, adding station-branded graphics and often re-voicing the publicist's narration.
- *"TV stations rarely use VNRs."* Over ten months, CMD documented [77 different TV stations](#) broadcasting fake news; 69 stations aired VNRs and eight aired satellite media tours with related VNRs. These include 13 TV stations in the ten largest U.S. media markets.
- *"TV stations only use VNRs as supplementary footage in original reports."* In 31 of the 87 VNR broadcasts that CMD documented, the entire aired "report" was the entire prepackaged VNR. In only seven of 87 cases did the TV station add any independently-gathered footage or information to the VNR-based segment. Only [once](#) did the additional material challenge the narrative produced by the broadcast PR firm for the paying client(s).
- *"VNRs and other provided and/or sponsored material provide footage that newsrooms would not be able to obtain otherwise."* Sometimes this is true; one frequently-cited example is outer space footage from NASA. Such hard-to-obtain footage will still be available if the policies recommended above are implemented; it will simply contain disclosures. In addition, many of the VNRs described in this report were selected for tracking because they seemed more newsworthy (and thus more likely to be aired) than other VNRs. Still, it's hard to

categorize them as valuable or irreplaceable additions to news broadcasts.

- *"Stronger disclosure policies would restrict newsrooms' editorial independence."* Simply requiring disclosure of provided and/or sponsored material to news audiences does nothing to restrict what newsrooms can air. What disclosure does is respect audiences' right to know, a vital principle that current policies and practices ignore.
- *"CMD's findings are not representative of how VNRs are actually used."* CMD tracked [36 VNRs](#) from three large broadcast PR firms. Although the exact size of the industry is not known, [at least 5,000 VNRs](#) are likely to be distributed in the United States each year. Therefore, CMD tracked roughly one percent of the VNRs being offered to TV newsrooms over the ten months of its investigation. While that's a small percentage, the number and range of TV stations implicated by CMD and their utter lack of disclosure make this report highly significant.