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Critical political economy in practice: the case of an advertising/editorial conflict at Brainstorm

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Abstract

Critical political economists argue that media in a democratic society are not inherently free, as they rely on advertisers for revenue, and their editorial content can be influenced by commercial considerations. However, liberal pluralist theorists argue that journalists' and editors' normative attachment to independence and professionalism provide a counterbalance to advertisers' wants. In South Africa, where commercial pressures have been exacerbated in increased competition for adspend, local publications have sought to create alternative revenue streams, such as supplements specifically targeted at advertisers. This research report examines the issues raised by such products by examining a conflict at the ICT publication *Brainstorm* over one of its supplements. The study looks at an incident of an advertiser demanding changes to editorial content and reactions to the demands within the media organisation, considering individual journalists' reactions and how the issue played out in several different departments in the publishing house. The research found that companies within the ICT sector, who are often also advertisers, routinely try to have editorial copy changed to their advantage, and that these companies do not have a clear understanding of the media industry and its processes. Journalists resist these changes, but the research found that supplements are not viewed as seriously by journalists as other types of editorial content, because the supplements are financed by advertisers. The research demonstrates that such supplements operate in a grey area because they blur the boundaries between advertising and editorial. As such, journalists and editors find it harder to defend their professional independence in producing the content. The fuzziness about whether the supplements are advertorial or editorial casts doubt on the credibility of such products.