

What Lies Beneath Genuine Content?



By

Sudakshina Bhattacharjee

Commercial Writer & Content Marketer

sudakshinakina.com



Sudakshina (Kina) Bhattacharjee

Commercial Writer and Content Marketer

Chances are, you write for a living (like me) and find yourselves navigating through the differences between writing news stories and writing marketable content.

Whether you're a journalist transitioning to the world of digital content marketing (again, like myself) or a budding copywriter, or a marketing communications professional, or even a voracious consumer of digital content who wishes to understand more about how news stories are written, you have landed on the right post!

Because I am about to take you through the differences between writing news stories and writing marketable content - and how these differences are increasingly merging, blurring together creating the risk of misinforming and misleading us, no thanks to easy access to publishing and publicising both news and content via digital and social media platforms, thereby leading to phenomena such as 'fake news' and 'alternative facts'.

News vs Content – What's the difference?

A very distinctive fine line exists between information that is published as 'news' and information that is marketed as 'content'.

Notice the different terms I have used here for what is essentially the same function - i.e. the dissemination and communication of information.

So, how can we tell which is which?

Let me show you how...

- **Purposes**

The overarching purpose of both news and content is to inform, educate and make people aware about something in particular.

With news, this refers to local, national and international events that affect the realms of politics, economies, trade and finance, health, education, culture, etc. News is published for us to consume and be aware of what is happening in and around us.

With content, this refers to products, services, facilities, functionalities and utilities that consumers can make use of so as to - ideally - improve the quality of their lives.



Sudakshina (Kina) Bhattacharjee

Commercial Writer and Content Marketer

Content is marketed for us to consume and [eventually] convert into customers of whatever is being promoted through it.

Typical examples of content marketing can come in the form of:

Blog Posts - i.e. standard piece of flowing text [not unlike this one, ahem!] that can be standalone or also have images, graphics, videos, podcast and links to other websites included.

Infographics - i.e. Facts and stats presented through creative visualisations to enhance the understanding and processing of complex data.

Explainer Videos - i.e. short [30 seconds - 5 mins] videos that convey specific messages to target audiences.

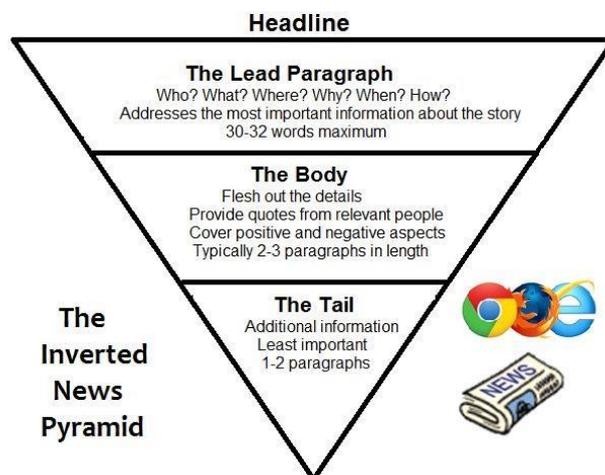
The promotional angle in these content forms will exist - how prominently depends on the expertise of the content creator whose challenge would be to create content that promotes a product or service without being blatant and yet authentic and engaging enough so that browsers take notice and nudge them through the conversion funnel! [More on the funnel in a bit...]

- **Structures**

This brings us nicely to the way news stories and content forms are structured.

Interestingly, here are the textbook structures that journalists and content creators are meant to follow when they are at work:

The structure for a news story is called **The Inverted News Pyramid**:



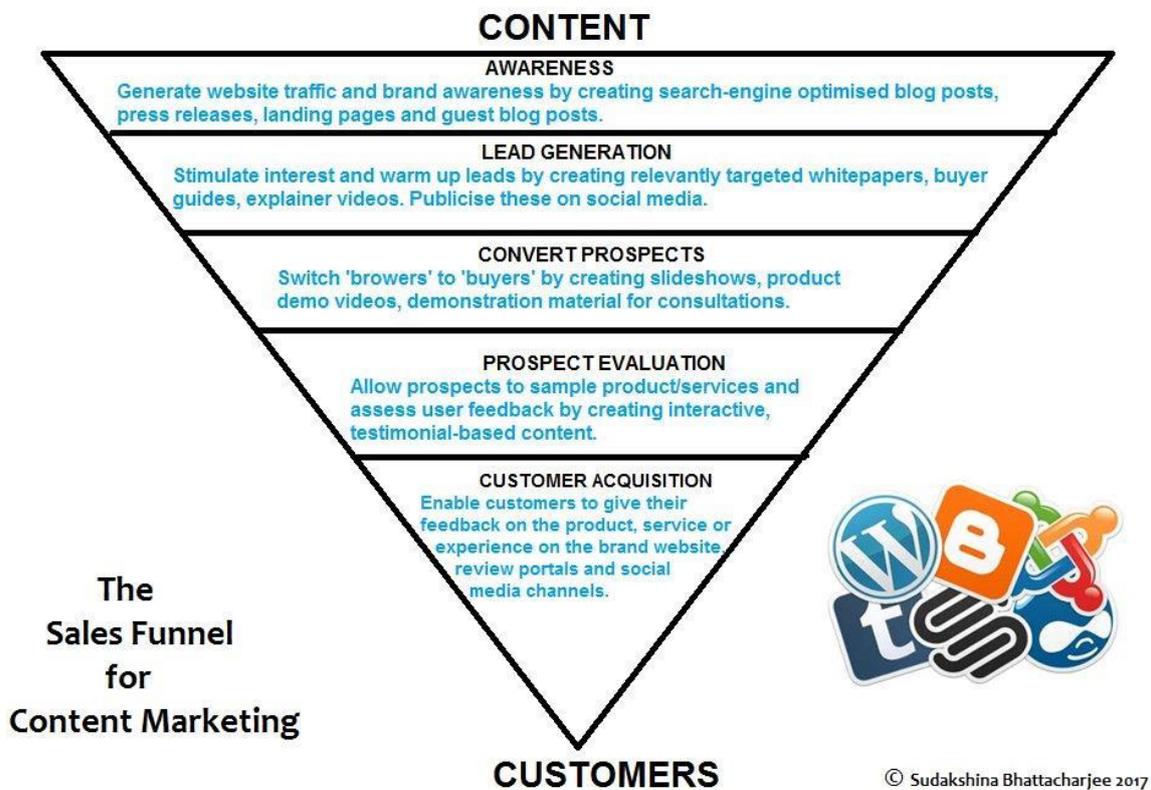


Sudakshina (Kina) Bhattacharjee

Commercial Writer and Content Marketer

And the structure for content creation is called the sales funnel for content marketing, which can [confusingly] come in various forms, depending on the type of web content that you are creating and who you are creating it for.

I have had a look at the main ones and come up with my own amalgamated version to make it easier for you to comprehend all the factors that go into creating marketable content:



The Sales Funnel for Content Marketing

Notice how both the structures appear inverted and how the focus for writing news and creating content are actually quite opposite each other in terms of their approach and focal points.

With news, the focus for journalists is to be accurate with facts, balanced in tone, impartial on opinions and objective in perspective.

With content, the focus for creators is to be poised on an angle, have a credible and engaging voice and bring out the strengths of the product/service that they are promoting as authentically and organically/naturally as possible.



Sudakshina (Kina) Bhattacharjee

Commercial Writer and Content Marketer

It's when these two are blurred together that confusion and controversies can effervesce and explode into the digital and physical realms.

The rise of misinformation

So, whether we believe to be informed via news stories or promotional content, the overarching purpose of consuming such information is to know more than we did before and believe that we are aware about what's going on in the world - and what impact this could have in our own lives.

But just as everything has a good and a bad side, information also has its ugly dimension...

Misinformation!

Yes, the dramatic pause is intentional here.

To be misinformed is when you feel you are informed, but with the wrong facts and stats, wrong ideas, wrong points and form wrong beliefs around matters both important and frivolous.

Now what can be defined as 'wrong' is subjective.

But as writers, journalists and content creators, it is our responsibility to ensure that whatever we create is - at the very least - factual and does not mislead our audiences.

However, there are a significant number of those who chose to mislead audiences and make money off the perusal of their content by employing manipulative psychological strategies so much so that you probably won't even realise that the content you are consuming could ultimately be promoting a product, a service, an incentive for you to continue to consume the content from such sources.

Such sources may not have your best interests in mind – although they will appear that they do, otherwise why would you be bothered to consume their content.

I am not judging such sources because my admonishing will probably fall on deaf ears!



Sudakshina (Kina) Bhattacharjee

Commercial Writer and Content Marketer

What I can say and do is show you some examples of how we could be consuming what we think is 'news' or 'infotainment' but whose hidden agenda is to encourage – if not, downright consider – checking out the product or service that is being promoted within the garb of the news format.

Example 1: News Article: 'Buy for Uni' mortgage turns students into landlords

Mortgages 'Buy for Uni' mortgage turns students into landlords

Anyone over 18 who is in higher education can apply for the deal, as long as they have backing from family

Source: The Guardian, 27.02.2017.

URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2017/feb/27/buy-for-uni-mortgage-students-landlords-higher-education>

On the face of this news article, the unsuspecting reader can expect to read about students taking up mortgages whilst they are at university to own their accommodation and rent it out when they leave.

This is new information and indeed can qualify as 'news' because the idea to help students with their accommodation requirements as well as jumping on to the property ladder even before they have graduated is something worth knowing about, especially for prospective university students and their parents, who are going to act as the guarantors for such mortgages.

But the news aspect of the article changes quickly to promotional content from the third paragraph itself:

The new "Buy for Uni" mortgage from The Loughborough Building Society promises up to 100% financing for a property purchase, as long as close relatives provide security. A similar product has been on offer through Bath Building Society for some years, but both have been met with calls for caution by students' representatives.

Under the Buy for Uni deal students who are over 18 in higher education in England and Wales can get a loan for up to £300,000 as long as the property is within 10 miles of where they study.

[Source: Ibid]



Sudakshina (Kina) Bhattacharjee

Commercial Writer and Content Marketer

Indeed, one could argue that one would wish to know where could one avail such student landlord mortgages from and I would agree with that.

But then, I can't seem to shirk off the feeling that this article has its origins from a press release that has been skilfully rewritten into a news article, as the subsequent paragraphs feature carefully-crafted quotes from the chief execs of the mortgage providers interspersed with the charges that the parent guarantors are going to have to fork out if they were to take out mortgages from the providers.

Result? Both mortgage providers are highly likely to get more visitors to their websites and enquiries into the products from interested readers.

Is this unethical or is this just business?

I'd say this is the business of news. After all, *The Guardian* is one of the very few newspapers who offer internet browsers free access to all their content. So, they need to generate revenue somewhere by promoting businesses who advertise with them.

It is just how it is.

All I'm saying is that not everything that is slated as 'news' is news in the purest form.

Yes, this article is factually accurate, well-written and follows the inverted pyramid news structure.

But it can be argued that it is also promoting a product, in this case, 'student landlord' mortgages.

Example 2: The Collaborated Blog Post:

Blogging is a great way of getting yourself heard, having your own dedicated audience who visit your site and read your posts because they dig your writing style, your way of communicating things.

I like to think blogs are equivalent to having your very own magazine that is written by you, is for your and for an audience that digs you!



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Blogs are thereby also great for you to develop your own personal brand, i.e. **Brand You**. My co-author, Fiona Talbot and I talk about the importance of building and sustaining Brand You in our [Business English guidebook](#).

If you just clicked on the link and checked out the landing page promoting this book, you have just done what I intended you to do - check out the book on my website.

I have therefore managed to get you to take interest in my product through the garb of talking about the benefits of blogging.

This is an example of content marketing - i.e. the business of using content to market a product or service.

Blogs have moved on from being static journals, or online diaries to becoming a favoured vehicle of content marketing.

There are countless blogs that successfully manage to develop audience bases and get content marketers to reach out to such bloggers and ask them to promote their wares by either inserting a link to a landing page, or embedding a video or infographic.

The audiences of such blogs are likely to take interest in the content, because they like or trust the blogger enough to believe that what the bloggers are recommending them is worth checking out.

In this way, businesses and bloggers collaborate with each other to promote each other through the sharing of content, links and also resort to their respective social media channels to do this.

As long as the content is factual and based on research that is from genuine, authoritative sources, the mutual exchange in content promotion is just another way of doing business.

It's only when the content is based on speculation, or half-truths, rumours, hearsay and gossip that things become messy and can quickly lead to misleading audiences, as it doesn't take long for something to 'go viral' and misinform all and sundry about something that isn't actually true.



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Commercial Writer and Content Marketer

So, what can we do?

When social media becomes the main platform for consuming news as opposed to the original news sites themselves, it can be quite easy to spread misinformation and create real news stories that are based on this!

Why?

Because unsuspecting users do not know nor have the inclination to know what the difference is between something posted on social media with something published by a news website or even a popular blog. It's all links and extracted content from the links that inundate our social media feeds 24x7 giving us a clicking spree that may or may not misinform us.

We could save ourselves from being misinformed by following two important steps when consuming content:

1. Look at the sources of the links and content being inserted within blog posts as well as news articles. Social media biggies, like Facebook and Twitter, are aiming to promote news stories that come from genuine news sources, which can be believed. However, they could also be promoting content coming from lesser known, or less trustworthy sites (because they are being paid to) and this is where the fine line between information and misinformation can evaporate.
2. Spend a few moments thinking about how the content is actually going to benefit us as consumers. As seen in the news example, if an authoritative source reckons that a certain type of mortgage is making its way on to the market, we can assume that this may well be the case. But, does this mean it's the absolute truth? Probably not!

Good content comes down to good writing and good business sense. If you feel you need more guidance on ensuring that your content reaches the right audiences and informs them appropriately, get in touch!



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About the Author

Sudakshina (Kina) Bhattacharjee is a commercial writer, blogger and content marketer based in London, United Kingdom.

She lives on the web at www.sudakshinakina.com