

**A Textual Analysis of Ford's "Drive One" Ad Campaign:
Introduction of the Domesticated Journalist**

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This paper is a textual analysis of eight advertisements created for the Ford Motor Company by the advertising agency Team Detroit to run on television and on the Internet in the fall of 2011. The ads revolve around the Ford tagline "Drive One." The first four spots feature Ford owners who were told they were about to attend market research focus groups at a local hotel/conference center, only to be thrust into press conferences with actors playing the assembled reporters. The actors loudly vie, hands raised, to ask the owners about their satisfaction with their new cars, which sit, well lit, nearby. The actors based their questions on knowledge about the customers given to them by producers before the shoots began.¹ As their Fords sit nearby,² the owners speak confidently about their choice of a Ford; the actors laugh at their jokes and, in one case, compliment a Ford owner on how adroitly he fielded their questions. Ford chose the press conference theme instead of a typical product testimonial because of the audience's tendency to "tune out" the latter. Company executives expressed the belief that viewers would pay more attention to real people led into "a very surprising situation."³

One of these spots became the subject of controversy in September 2011 after a Ford owner claimed during one of the press conferences that he "wasn't going to buy another car that was bailed out by the government."⁴ A Detroit newspaper columnist asserted the Obama

Administration had pressured Ford to pull the spot. Ford denied the claim, noting that the spot continued to run online, and restated its support for the government's bailout of Chrysler and General Motors.⁵ Critics noted Ford had accepted a \$5.9 billion research and development loan from the federal government. Further, Ford's support of their competitors' bailout rang hollow, they said, because Ford too would have failed had the government not acted to save Chrysler and GM.⁶ One observer called the ad a "cheap shot" against Ford's resurgent competitors, suggesting that the company's government-backed "free pass" had expired.⁷

The second series of spots in the campaign promote the Ford Fusion Hybrid and revolve around a portable rolling tri-fold anchor desk contained in a large mirrored box. The set opens and a news story introducing a feature of the car is read by actor/comedian Dave Holmes in the role of news anchor; in each of the spots, Holmes "tosses" (story is given or "thrown" to another colleague for additional comment) to a nearby on-scene reporter who completes a brief "person on the street" (POS) interview with a passerby or with the owner of a competing model of car, and then tosses back to Holmes for a concluding statement on the Fusion Hybrid's quality, after which the news set is closed by the crew.

Communication scholars have conducted little research on the use of journalism or journalists in commercials by companies and advertising agencies. Thus, these "Drive One" ads for Ford provide a prime opportunity to examine a largely unexplored segment of media discourse about the role of the journalist and the importance of journalism to society. The paper explains how, through these ads for Ford, "journalism is supposed to operate in theory, and how for better or worse it has operated in practice."⁸ Taking a cue from Matthew Ehrlich, the paper asks "what is really being suggested about what the press is and has been" and "what it could and should be."⁹

The Press Conference

The press conference is a tool of news management initiated by a corporation, governmental institution, or other entity to control the flow of information about itself to develop, sustain, or restore its public image. For the journalist, the fact that a press conference “invites coverage from a certain point of view” does not change the reality that these events are typically easy to cover, do not require them to spend time developing a sense of context for readers or viewers, and conveniently provide “the dramatic, visual, concise characteristics” they and their editors desire.¹⁰ As Michael Schudson notes, news professionals have an unquenchable “thirst for a readily available, reliable flow of information.”¹¹

In his classic work *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, Daniel Boorstin argued it was the public's burgeoning demand for a steady stream of timely and compelling news that impelled journalists to rely more often on “pseudo-events” in the coverage of their beats. “If there is no news visible to the naked eye, or to the average citizen,” he wrote, “we still expect it to be there for the enterprising newsman.”¹² Boorstin observed that we simply began to demand more “news” of the world than it could provide. “We require that something be fabricated to make up for the world's deficiency,” Boorstin noted. And so we are presented with more events concocted solely to attract media attention and that often are only dubiously connected to what actually is transpiring, as Boorstin explained. The journalist who endures long stretches in “controlled institutional settings”¹³ like the press conference does so chiefly to satisfy our “demand for illusions”¹⁴ and to ensure this demand is converted into good ratings, high circulation, or many page views.

Journalism's shaky financial state means reporters try to meet this demand while their ranks thin and as the number of public relations professionals grows. PR professionals now

outnumber journalists by a 3:1 ratio.¹⁵ The imbalance has caused the percentage of stories based entirely or in part on public relations generated material to increase. The often blurred boundary between news and public relations received renewed attention when it was revealed in 2005 that the U.S. Department of Education paid columnist Armstrong Williams \$240,000 to promote the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind education policy on his television show and in his syndicated newspaper column.¹⁶ A year earlier, the federal Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) distributed video news releases (VNRs) promoting the administration's Medicare program to television stations. Fifty of the stations aired the releases, set up to resemble news reports, in their entirety. Just as Williams did not reveal the Department of Education payment to his audience, the stations that aired the VNRs failed to inform viewers that Karen Ryan and Alberto Garcia were actors hired by HHS to create the impression they were reporters.

Today's journalists work against a backdrop highlighted by the blurring, if not the erasure, of the boundary between news and entertainment, news and commentary, and, for some veteran journalists, uncomfortably close ties between their organizations' news and advertising and marketing departments. Further, the 24-hour news cycle has heightened the pressure on journalists to furnish timely, compelling, frequently updated stories, while the imperatives inspired by the Internet demand that they shoot video, take pictures, and blog as well as write. On a broader level, these developments affect journalism's cultural authority, which Paul Starr argued "is derived from performing a service and from the ability to determine the *needs* (author's emphasis) of clients."¹⁷ We have been educated to believe that a primary task of the journalist is to supply accurate and objective information with which we make informed decisions and form our impressions about the world. We expect that in doing so, journalists

gather news in an ethical fashion and act with our best interests at heart.

One would think that an advertisement that built on journalism themes, particularly one that references constraints on the craft, would signal a threat to the journalist's cultural authority that journalists would attempt to thwart. But Geoffrey Baym notes that the "discourses of news, politics, entertainment, and marketing have grown deeply inseparable; the languages and practices of each have lost their distinctiveness and are being melded into previously unimaginable combinations."¹⁸ The journalism-themed ad is not a new development; yet when considered in light of these changes, ads like those analyzed here offer the opportunity to explore an affirmation of journalism as it is practiced now—tightly tied to the imperatives of marketing and advertising and more dependent than ever on official sources and more subject to more extensive management by public relations professionals.

The "Person on the Street" Interview

The second set of Ford ads analyzed in this paper revolves around "person on the street" (POS) interviews conducted with Ford owners and interested passersby. Although journalism scholars disagree on who conducted the first interview that appeared in a newspaper, the technique was an important newsgathering tool by the start of the 20th century. "It fit effortlessly into a journalism already fact-centered and news-centered, rather than devoted primarily to political commentary or preoccupied with literary aspirations," Schudson explains.¹⁹ Use of the interview also helped journalists identify their field as "a distinct occupation with its own patterns of behavior."²⁰

But the technique has long had its critics. Boorstin, for example, took a dim view of the interview, claiming it was a by-product of the public's growing and later insatiable demand in the late 19th century for news. Like the "pseudo-event" he identified and described, the interview

was part of the movement from “news gathering” to “news making.”²¹ The value of the POS interview also has been questioned. Intended to contextualize a story for the audience, POS interviews are, in the words of a former radio and television news director “one of the most inane, worthless, and overused story techniques.”²² Learning what people think about an issue or how they have been affected by, for example, a tragic event, can be significant, but that significance is often outweighed by the technique’s predictability and the ease with which what is said can be manipulated to suit a story’s theme.²³

Journalism and/in Advertising

This analysis is also built on twin assertions by William Leiss, Stephen Kline, and Sut Jhally that advertising is “one of the great vehicles of social communication” and is “an integral part of modern culture.”²⁴ Ads, notes Serra Tinic, are “more than capitalist propaganda”; they are a “significant site of cultural production.”²⁵ The impact of an ad stems in part from the ability of its creator to “appropriate and transform a vast range of symbols and ideas” into messages that move products and services. Impact further depends on how well an ad recycles “cultural models and references” and inserts them into the audience’s experience.²⁶ “For what is carried in and with advertising is what we know, what we share, what we believe in,” writes James Twitchell. “It is who we are. It is us.”²⁷

Judith Williamson, in her classic work *Decoding Advertisements*, makes a similar assertion: “the work of an advertisement is not to invent meaning...but to translate meaning for [a product] by means of a sign system we already know.”²⁸ An ad resonates when the viewer activates its elements, which typically have been drawn from existing “referent systems,”²⁹ as Williamson claims, and begins to create meaning. How a consumer experiences a product matters more to an advertiser than how effectively an ad presents a product’s attributes—this is

part of what Falk called the "thematization of the product-user relationship."³⁰

Built into these attempts to sell Fords are indications by the company and Team Detroit about what the public thinks about reporters—our trust in them and our perception of how effectively they do their jobs. As Twitchell explains, ads are experienced "in our shared myths, in our concepts of self, and in our marking of time."³¹ As active and knowledgeable consumers of ads, we are quite aware of how what we consume is reflected in the "ordering of life." But as Twitchell also asserts, advertising "has corrupted democracy by its eagerness to compress, reduce, and even distort in order to sell."³²

Stuart Ewen believes the businessperson's goal is broader: to nurture in consumers through advertising a "philosophy of life," where commerce and consumption are positioned as sources of truth. The market, not social interaction or personal experience, provides our "world of facts"³³—what to include and, more importantly, exclude as we develop our sense of reality. Advertisers often go to great lengths—ethically questionable lengths for some—to ensure that a viewer enjoys a positive buying experience in an environment that "supports product promotion."³⁴ The chance that a viewer might connect an ad to objectionable content must be minimized, they believe. Faced with declining ad revenues, many news organizations have torn down the well-known "wall" separating their advertising and editorial departments, giving advertisers freer reign to shape news content, from killing stories on controversial topics, to softening stories that might cast an advertiser or product in a negative light, to obtaining advanced copies of stories from journalists to check for potentially troublesome content.³⁵

Thus, one would not expect an ad for Ford to revolve around crusading journalists devoted to exposing malfeasance by public officials and corporate misdeeds. Still, it is possible that the decision to craft a particular impression of journalists can be read as further evidence for

concerned veteran journalists that the field's importance is eroding or at least is being redefined. As Tinic claims, just because an ad's creator appropriates a social issue in order to sell a product does not mean that the issue is automatically converted into "currency," and thus, to use her word, "devalued."³⁶

Exploring texts that reference journalism can provoke discussion about changes in the field and in newsgathering—even when those references are deployed by advertising professionals to establish a connection to the Ford brand. But as Joe Saltzman explains, the veracity of an image or description of a journalist is not as important as the fact that they are "very real in the public mind."³⁷ The goal of analysis, then, is to enhance our understanding "of what the public of a specific era believes about its media and the people in that media."³⁸ Analysis also enables researchers to chart shifts in the social value the public sees in occupations.³⁹ Saltzman contends that today, the public and journalists are muddling through a "love-hate relationship" rooted in the former's "confusion" about the journalist's role and behavior. We applaud watchdog journalists when they reveal and chronicle corruption, but cringe when journalists exhibit bias or act callously in the pursuit of a story.⁴⁰

Research Questions

The following questions drove the analysis reported in this paper:

RQ1: What do these Ford ads ask us to think about the working relationships between journalists and public relations professionals?

RQ2: What do these Ford ads ask us to think about the dedication of journalists to the field's guiding principles?

RQ3: What do these Ford ads ask us to think about the current state of the craft of journalism?

Method

The author performed a textual analysis on a convenience sample of four press conference-themed and four portable anchor desk-themed Ford "Drive One" spots. Additional spots created by Team Detroit (in all, 30 spots were planned as part of the "Drive One" campaign, all of which revolved around journalism-related themes) did not air in the Philadelphia market. The author viewed the ads in the sample on the air in real time, via DVR, on YouTube, and on the *AdWeek* magazine website, where several of the Ford ads were packaged with an article about the bailout controversy referenced in the introduction. To properly contextualize the ads, a short video made and posted on YouTube by Ford in May 2011, was also analyzed. In the video, Matt Van Dyke, the company's director of U.S. marketing, explains the development of the "Drive One" campaign.

Following the suggestion of Stuart Hall, the textual analysis began with a "long preliminary soak"⁴¹ in the eight Ford ads. This was followed by numerous readings of the ads from sources listed in the preceding paragraph and then by subsequent readings of the Van Dyke video. Comprehensive notes were taken during the readings. The additional readings and repeated review of the notes enabled the author to pinpoint, confirm, and refine themes that emerged as the analysis progressed. "Breaking through" a text, as Leo Masterman contended, produces a thorough exploration of "the rhetorical techniques through which meanings are produced."⁴² Careful consideration of the ads' "form, rhetoric, and style" moved the researcher toward revealing "the social and historical processes" underlying their creation.⁴³ As Peter Larsen suggests, meaning is not simply built into a text; instead, predominant cultural values give it its shape.⁴⁴ A proper appreciation of the version of journalistic practice seen in the Ford ads comes from close examination of the "visual, verbal, rhetorical, and presentational codes"

that Team Detroit deployed to make these ads "eventful," to use Abhik Roy's word.⁴⁵

Once the analysis was completed, the author attempted to place the Ford ads in one of the 13 categories developed by Saltzman to "create a new literature that helps explain how various publics feel about different kinds of journalists:"⁴⁶

- *Anonymous Reporters*: Traveling in packs, they aggressively and rudely pursue stories.
- *Columnists and Critics*: Reviled and power-hungry, they "stop at nothing" to find and print "that must-read item" or to "collect their pound of flesh."
- *Cub Reporters*: New to the field, they "can ask all the questions that the audience wants to know."
- *Editors*: Acerbic but compassionate and always in the office, they determine which stories run.
- *Flawed Male Journalists*: They go to at times questionable lengths "to get the story at all costs," according to Saltzman. Their at times unethical conduct is excused because their work serves the public interest.
- *Investigative Reporters*: Courageous and diligent, they are true watchdogs for the public.
- *Memorable Newsroom Families*: The newsroom staff is the only family a reporter has. Its members are "ready to do anything for the paper or news program even it means giving up a personal life," as Saltzman explains.
- *Photojournalists and Newsreel Shooters*: They risk their lives to capture images that accurately and compellingly depict events happening around the world. They are both heroes and villains, courageous and corrupt.
- *Publishers and Media Owners*: Obsessed with increasing circulation or ratings, they use their media outlets to achieve their own goals, which usually revolve around acquiring and exerting power.
- *Real-Life Journalists*: Their presence lends authenticity to films and shows that depict journalism. They often comment on the actions of a film or show's stars.
- *Sob Sisters*: Every bit the professional equal of male journalists, female journalists yearn for "marriage, children, and life at home," notes Saltzman.

- *Sports Journalists*: Some expose corruption, but most, argues Saltzman, "simply go out and do their jobs." They often are deployed to burnish the film portrayals of sports stars.
- *War and Foreign Correspondents*: "The perfect movie hero," says Saltzman, "whose daily work involves patriotism, danger, violence, and drama"—even if that means accepting official censorship and expressing their patriotism in their work.

With these aims in mind, we turn now to a description of the ads that highlights the elements of journalistic and public relations practice adapted by the ads' creators, followed by a discussion of their major themes and the implications of those themes for the public's perception of the craft of journalism.

The "Drive One" Campaign: The Press Conference

Chris, a "Real Ford Owner," as identified by an on-screen graphic over a freeze frame, arrives at what appears to be a hotel or a building in a business park. He parks his black Ford F-150 in front of the main entrance under an overhang. A woman dressed in a blue skirt and white blouse—Kristen—leads him through the lobby and through a door; a man sitting on a nearby couch smiles up at them, as though he were next to experience what lies on the other side of the door. The camera at this point is positioned high and over their shoulders, suggesting that the audience is watching internal surveillance footage.

As Chris walks into the room, he flashes a surprised smile. His image is frozen as a graphic "Really Surprised" appears on screen. As noted in the introduction, Chris and the other Ford buyers were unaware they were being led into press conferences. Kristen smiles in the background of the freeze frame. A quick, blurry pan across a sea of reporters follows; they raise their hands and shout questions at Chris, as in a typical introductory moment during a real press conference.

Without being called on, one reporter is permitted to ask his question: "Chris, was buying American important to you?" Chris responds, "I wasn't going to buy another car that was bailed out by our government." Chris sits at a rectangular table, three mikes positioned on a small stand in front of him on the table, and a Ford backdrop, the kind one might see if Ford officials or a coach or player from a collegiate or professional sports team were giving an actual press conference, behind him. His hands are folded; a glass of water sits off to his side.

As Chris fields questions from the actor/reporters, Kristen stands, holding a folio, slightly behind Chris and to the left. Her position suggests a PR person carefully monitoring the interplay between reporters and client. The spot cuts to a chest-up shot of Chris taken from his left. Camera flashes fire, bouncing off the Ford backdrop. Chris continues: "I was going to buy from a manufacturer that was standing on their own, win lose or draw." The spot cuts back to a medium head-on shot, taken from below and between two reporters, as if the footage was taken by one of them. "That's what America's about, taking the chance to succeed and understanding when you fail that you've got to pick yourself up and go back to work." The Ford logo appears in blue against a white background on the screen. "Ford is that company for me," Chris concludes as the Ford logo and campaign slogan "Drive One" appears.

In the second spot featuring Ford driver Greg, a blue Ford Focus pulls up under the overhang. As in the "Chris" spot, the car is seen from a high vantage point, as if a security camera captured the footage. The spot moves to a ground level shot of the car, as Kristen greets Greg. A valet gets into the car and prepares to pull away. "Welcome—thanks for coming," she says as they shake hands. Viewers learn neither of their names (the author found the drivers' names while researching news coverage of the ads). "We're going to be heading on into the interview," Kristen says as they move through the door of Conference Room 2 toward cameras

and lights at the other end of the room. Again the audience sees a freeze frame with a graphic that introduces him as a "Real Ford Owner." Kristen briefly looks behind Greg, perhaps to check on the status of tardy reporters.

Like Chris, Greg is surprised by the gaggle of journalists, a fact emphasized by another "Really Surprised" graphic. A quick pan with a wobbly camera moves from a sea of raised hands to Greg as he pulls in his chair behind the table. Kristen gestures to acknowledge a reporter. "Was fuel efficiency an important factor in buying this car?" a reporter from the second row asks. We see only the backs of the journalists' heads as he poses the question.

"Oh, definitely," replies Greg. "As all my friends would tell you, I'm one of the cheapest people you'll ever meet," he says as we see a straight-on shot of him seated at the table. Greg's response elicits laughter from the reporters. The spot cuts to the right and a long shot of Greg and the reporters. His Focus is positioned near the door where they entered. "And whenever I was filling up with gas before, I'd have a scowl on my face," Greg concludes in a close-up taken from the side.

The spot pans quickly to a female reporter, standing with pen in hand. She says, "You seem very comfortable up there; have you done this before?" The spot suggests that journalists are used to dealing with sources who have mastered dealing with the media. Then it is back to a straight-on shot of Greg. "No, I haven't, and I'm actually terrified right now," he says. More laughter is heard from the reporters as the Ford logo and slogan are shown.

As the third spot begins, John and Jill pull up in their black Fusion Hybrid. Kristen directs them toward the conference room; reporters are seen leaping from their seats to ask questions amid a barrage of flashes. Jill laughs at the surprise press conference as the couple is led into the room. But like the buyers in the other ads, they quickly show skill at interacting with

reporters. Kristen taps John, who appears to be Jill's husband, on the left shoulder to direct his attention to a reporter who wears a white shirt and has a soul patch. "What's it like driving a Fusion hybrid?" asks the reporter, seated in the second row slightly to the couple's left as they sit at the table. "You can read every system that's operating by pushing a button," Jill begins. The spot cuts to a close-up of Jill taken from her left. "It's like driving a computer," she concludes. A long shot of the room follows, with the black Fusion now in the foreground to the couple's right.

"What would be the hardest thing for you to give up?" a female reporter asks. "The miles per gallon," John responds. "When you're used to filling your car once a week," he continues over a medium two-shot taken from their left. We cut to a straight-on shot as John emphasizes the difference with hands on the table, on their sides a foot apart. "Then suddenly once every three weeks?" he continues. The Ford logo and slogan appears. "Believe me, it'll be a big difference going back," John asserts.

Yoleine, featured in the fourth spot, is perhaps the most surprised of the Ford buyers upon finding the reporters in the conference room. The spot begins with her Focus pulling up. She exchanges greetings and a handshake with Kristen as the valet prepares to pull the car away. As in the other spots, "Real Ford Owner" appears over a freeze frame, this time of their handshake. Kristen announces Yoleine's entry into the press conference by abruptly saying, "...and here she is." Yoleine cringes slightly and tucks her closed right hand under her chin.

Again, the reporters are jostling with each other, trying to get Yoleine's attention. Kristen stands motionless behind her, folio in hand. "What do your friends think of your car?" asks a male reporter, as a female competitor, standing to his left, looks on. A third reporter stands a short distance away, holding a legal pad. They sit as soon as the first reporter is called on. A glass of water sits to Yoleine's right. "They think it's cool," she replies, turning her head to

acknowledge him. The reporter follows up: "What did they say about it?" Yoleine quickly replies over other shouted questions: "That it's cool." Laughter breaks out in the conference room as the viewer sees a long shot with Yoleine's Focus in the foreground. "Okay, thank you" is heard jokingly from the reporter.

Camera flashes fire. Kristen points to another reporter, who asks, "Does your Focus match your personality?" Yes, says Yoleine. "It's very classic, it's funny. It's quirky," she says. Yoleine pauses slightly as the audience's vantage point shifts to the other side of the room. "It's sleek, it's shiny, it's practical," she continues as a reporter on the right side of the room raises a digital recorder to capture her thoughts. "And it's smart," Yoleine stresses.

Yoleine opens her mouth and rolls her eyes slightly, as if searching for a compliment to her intelligence, or to suggest she might add a more responsible sounding attribute to her list. More laughter follows, and then an exultant "Whoo!" and a "Yoleine" from the reporters as we see the Ford graphic. Instead of challenging Yoleine on her self-aggrandizing response, reporters congratulate her for so deftly fielding their softball questions.

The "Drive One" Campaign: The Portable Anchor Desk

The first of the "portable anchor desk" ads analyzed for this paper begins with a brief shot of the large mirrored box located at a gas station, followed by a shot of a Toyota Camry pulling up to a gas pump. A Ford Fusion Hybrid sits ahead near the next pump. From a low vantage point, the audience sees the set being pushed open by members of the fictional broadcast's crew. Inside the box is a tri-fold anchor desk, with positions for sports and weather, but only the main anchor position is occupied. A serious, pulsing news theme announces the start of a fictional newscast. The anchor, played by Dave Holmes, peers into the camera and settles into his chair. The director and a cameraperson make last-second preparations for air.

"Ford Fusion Hybrid emerges as the clear fuel economy leader," Holmes says confidently; he then tosses to actress Kimberly Irion, who is playing the on-the-scene reporter. Irion had been seen seconds earlier in a long shot scurrying into place near the pump where the Camry is located. She is positioned roughly 10 feet from the anchor desk. She adjusts her earpiece. We see her first from the side, along with the cameraperson about to record her interview, and then head-on from his camera. Practically shouting into a flag-less handheld microphone, she announces that the Fusion Hybrid gets 10 miles more per gallon than the Toyota Camry Hybrid.

Irion then interviews a man identified with an on-screen graphic only as a "Camry Owner." He is smiling, almost as if he is about to do something funny on camera—or that he may surmise that Irion expects only a curt, clever sound bite. "That's not good, I would like 10 more miles," he says. "He's going to have a lot to think about, Kimberly," interjects a confident Holmes. Irion then darts off to her next story.

Over a shot of the crew collapsing the set, Holmes adds, "And there you have it" before telling us as the Ford logo appears that the Fusion Hybrid is the "most fuel efficient mid-sized sedan in America." Triumphant trumpets sound as the ad ends.

In the second ad, a woman with curly hair and wearing a striped shirt walks near an office building on a sunny day. The first shot is taken from a high vantage point, suggesting a surveillance camera monitoring the courtyard. She stands next to the Fusion as the crew opens the anchor desk. As cameras are positioned and the stage manager reviews the script with Holmes, she and a second woman, wearing a green dress and blue sweater, look stunned by what is happening. Irion's dash into interview position is seen from the same overhead shot.

The anchor desk now open, Holmes tells viewers that the Fusion is the most dependable

mid-sized car, according to J.D. Power and Associates. He tosses to Irion, who hurriedly asks the young woman with the curly hair, "Any thoughts about this news?" The woman pulls slowly away from Irion, who puts her hand on the woman's left shoulder. "I'm...I've no idea what's going on," is her halting reply. Satisfied with an incomplete quote, Irion runs off and the set is closed. The young woman, smiling slightly, tells the other woman in the green dress, "They told me it was the most dependable mid-sized sedan—then they ran back into their little box." She gestures toward the box, bending both arms at the elbow, as if directing a plane on a tarmac. The tone of her comment suggests that broadcast journalism is unimportant theater carried out by reporters who have only sporadic contact with the communities they cover.

An African American man wearing a stylish fedora gets out of a black Camry in the first few seconds of the third anchor desk spot. He is parked in the lot of the "Bank of Trust." As he heads toward an ATM located on an outside wall of the building, the set opens, stopping the man for a second in his tracks. The camera is rolled down a ramp and into position, and a light is placed for Holmes. Irion is seen running toward her potential interview subject from the "surveillance camera" angle. The spot then cuts back to Holmes. With a still image of a Fusion over his left shoulder accompanied by a "Resale Value" graphic, he says, "Three years from now, a Ford Fusion is projected to be worth more than a 2011 Toyota Camry."

The spot cuts to Irion and her cameraperson, ready for the interview. Irion asks the man (identified only as "Camry Owner"), "Any thoughts on this news?" The man, holding his ATM card, is skeptical; he leans back slightly and asks Irion, "Are you sure?" The two-shot continues; Irion nods emphatically and says, "I'm absolutely positive." The set is collapsed; Holmes rearranges the pages of his script. "Fusion is projected to hold its resale value better than Camry," he says as we see a dolly shot of a red Fusion, then the Ford logo and tagline. The

closed anchor desk is located behind the car for the last shot.

In the final spot, a woman wearing sunglasses drives a silver Honda Accord into the parking lot of the Lakeside Car Wash, whose large colorful sign recalls the 1950s. She rolls down her window to see what is transpiring in the lot. We next see her standing in the lot. She looks on and smiles as a member of the broadcast crew passes in front of her with a light on a stand. "As America focuses on quality, we look at the Ford Fusion," Holmes says. "Its quality is unsurpassed by Toyota Camry or Honda Accord."

We then see a quick low-angle shot of Irion's legs as she scurries through the parking lot to interview the woman. Momentarily surprised by Irion's arrival, the woman drops her folded arms as the interview begins. "Are you surprised by this?" Irion asks in a one-shot as she holds the microphone close to the woman's face. There is a quick cut to a two-shot. "I am surprised," the woman replies, "but I guess that means I'll have to give it a go." Back on the set, Holmes opines happily, "What a terrific attitude," as if to suggest that only upbeat sources should be included in stories.

Irion darts off, presumably to the next interview or story; her sudden movement surprises the woman. The crew closes the set; there is a cut to a slow dolly shot. We see the last of the anchor desk and then a blue Fusion parked near the car wash entrance.

The Van Dyke Video

The video begins with a simple graphic (white type on a blue background) that identifies Ford executive Matt Van Dyke and asks him: "Can you describe the evolution of the Ford 'Drive One' campaign?" Following the graphic, Van Dyke is seen seated at a table. Tacked to the wall behind him is an array of sample Ford print ads. He explains the goals of the campaign's first two phases: to "establish the rational benefits" of owning a Ford, and then to sustain the

campaign's "quality, green, safe, smart pillars." The third phase, which included the ads analyzed in this paper, was aimed at striking an emotional chord with viewers. The Ford team endorsed the idea that "we really have to surprise people. We really have to be more disruptive," Van Dyke says.

A second graphic then asks Van Dyke to describe the "challenges" of using actual Ford owners in the press conference spots. Ads that feature "real people authentically telling your story" veer into "the territory of testimonials," which the audience often rejects because they have seen so many, Van Dyke says. The Ford team determined that "if you take real people and put them in a very surprising situation, people will watch." The "situation" they selected was a press conference held in "what almost looks like the White House briefing room." Upon entering the room, the Ford owners faced "11 cameras, a full press corps"—a "media scrum,"⁴⁷ in Van Dyke's words. "Imagine walking into a conference room and being surprised with a 'TMZ-like' assortment of cameras, flashing lights, and a group of reporters," noted a writer for Ford's website.⁴⁸ A *New York Times* article appearing the same day offered a slight variation on this theme: "The idea that people today are more than ready for their close-ups, for their 15 minutes of fame, has been widely discussed."⁴⁹ Building the ads on the experiences of real people enabled Ford to "get that honesty and the credibility that so often you can't just get from an ad,"⁵⁰ Van Dyke argues.

Discussion

We now turn to a discussion of the main themes that emerged from analysis of the Ford "Drive One" ads and of the Van Dyke video. Each section is an attempt to answer one of the research questions posed earlier in the paper.

Working Relationships

What is the preferred reading of journalism, of public relations, and the relationship between the professionals in these fields suggested by Ford in these ads? At first glance, Irion and the journalists gathered for the "Drive One" press conferences exemplify Saltzman's "anonymous reporters"; we learn only Kimberly's first name from the spots. Moreover, they move quickly—as a pack in the press conference spots—from story to story. Their conduct certainly does not indicate a desire to serve as the public's watchdog—the hallmark of the true investigative reporter, as Saltzman explains in his typology. These reporters do not aggressively pursue stories; these stories come to them. The investigative reporter's inclination to act in an adversarial fashion, to challenge official assertions and impressions, to "afflict the comfortable," even in a staged, controlled setting, is absent.

Instead, these ads ask us to believe that public relations professionals like Kristen skillfully manage, or "handle," reporters through tactics like the press conference—one of the "socially organized distortions built into the structures and routines of news gathering" discussed by Schudson⁵¹—and that reporters now accept, even expect, this level of management. Kristen permits the reporters to ask follow-up questions of the Ford owners, but the questions only serve to enhance a sense of theatre; they are not attempts to clarify points made earlier. Further, Ford's ad team—or Van Dyke at least—seems to believe that the audience perceives the press conference as a tool for burnishing celebrity rather than for gathering news. The spots also suggest that the audience believes that the press conference was originally conceived as a place where journalists could aggressively confront key players in their stories, rather than as a tool used by those players to manage the evolution of those stories.

Team Detroit has referenced in these ads what Ewen might call a "spectacle of change,"

where the "frustrations and boredom" of the consumer—and the journalists—are deployed to sustain "the passivity and acceptance of the marketplace."⁵² With the information about the Fords successfully "elevated to the level of the only truth available," more "radical conceptions of change"⁵³—more aggressive questions by the actor/reporters, or, to project somewhat, an investigative report on whether the Ford models were in fact better than the Camry or the Accord—are not available. Instead, the fictional reporters seem content—giddy at times, in fact—to be reduced to covering a staged event featuring happy consumers lavishing praise on their cars. Challenging on behalf of their audience assertions made by the Ford owners about their cars is the furthest thing from their minds. The ads suggest that Irion simply does not have time to challenge them; reporters at the press conference, on the other hand, happily take part in the stagecraft concocted by Kristen, the fictional PR person.

Their giddiness comes from the detailed and compelling answers they have received to their less than probing questions—a nod to the journalist's "unquenchable thirst" for easily accessible information discussed by Schudson. At times, they seem only to be collecting quotes. They bandy about, shouting questions, and are easily satisfied with the responses. In the anchor desk spots, Irion collects the quotes she needs to flesh out a superficial treatment of events and then leaves the scene. Unlike actual reporters, who may still cringe at being forced to gather news in "controlled institutional settings"⁵⁴ (putting aside for the moment complaints from critics that journalists often use the press conference as the setting for their own dramas), the reporters allowed into the press conferences are happy, grateful to be there, so much so that they end up cheering Yoleine for her skilled repartee with them in the fourth "press conference" spot analyzed here. Yoleine does not provide much information, but she is clever and proves to be telegenic. And that is enough.

The spots suggest a view of reporters as having abandoned pushing back against the influence of the public relations person. Instead, the press conference is positioned as the only newsgathering game in town. We are asked to conclude that this is what a modern-day "ambush" interview—the kind made famous by the late CBS journalist Mike Wallace—looks like; the surprise and aggressiveness at the heart of the tactic have in the press conference ads been co-opted by the public relations professional. Kristen deftly manages the subjects covered in the interview and the range of questions asked by the reporters. And in the anchor desk ads, Irion has time for only a few questions that confirm Ford's assertions about their product before heading off—perhaps to cover another story furnished by a public relations person.

Dedication to Journalistic Principles

Irion and the reporters assembled for the "Drive One" press conference show little adherence to accepted journalistic principles; their approach to newsgathering would likely frustrate journalism educators. The reporters make no attempt to imbue their stories about new Fords with balance, fairness, or objectivity. They construct their stories using only information and quotes gathered from prospective and satisfied Ford owners. No attempt is made to flesh out their assertions by, for example, referencing a consumer publication that takes issue with the claims or by even talking to some dissatisfied owners. Moreover, their at times overly theatrical conduct suggests that they are close to making themselves part of the story, a practice that can compromise a reporter's ability to piece together a complete account of events.

Ford's anchor desk spots affirm the validity of "parachute journalism," the practice of sending a reporter to a scene to cover a story and then pulling the reporter out once the most significant part of the story is over. The spots suggest to viewers that journalists do not remain at the site of a story long enough to provide ample context. This is exemplified in the anchor desk's

portability. It moves from place to place, opening only to briefly report on Ford-related information. Irion embodies this tendency, darting in and out of shots and picking up brief answers to her equally brief questions. Further, there is no "enterprise" in Irion's reporting; she has not been permitted by Team Detroit and Ford to wander the fictional neighborhoods depicted in the ads, getting to know residents, merchants, and officials to plant the seeds for future stories. Irion goes no further than a quick stand-up with her subjects, an approach that does not allow for nuanced discussion of issues. She does not ask her sources for detailed explanation; she does not ask follow up questions. The subjects are not identified by name. Viewers are not asked to think Irion spent time hanging out in the neighborhoods near the Bank of Trust or the Lakeside Car Wash, talking to a range of people to build sufficient context for her stories. Her frantic approach speaks to the constrained nature of today's newsgathering, where shrinking news staffs grapple with the 24-hour news cycle.

Both sets of ads suggest reporters do not have the time necessary to seek depth and perspective in pursuit of a story. They lack the inclination to act as true watchdogs for the public. The reporters at the Ford press conference can only ask a few questions before presumably filing their stories—without seeking comment from representatives of Honda and Toyota. And as a member of what is likely a truncated, overworked staff, Irion can only ask a question or two before she has to move on, perhaps to prepare an online version of the on-air Ford story to which she has just contributed. In short, this is the best journalists can do. Ford did not even have to bother trying to "obfuscate" the "fundamental relations" of the world noted by Ewen,⁵⁵ so disempowered is the journalist in these spots. But bother they do; for example, Irion's microphone lacks a "flag" which would identify the news organization for which she works. She is just one more "content creator," a recently coined term used to describe the growing number

of journalists who, thanks to the industry's precarious financial state, find themselves creating "branded content" for corporations skeptical of the effectiveness of traditional advertising.⁵⁶

State of the Craft

What the audience sees in these ads for Ford is journalism contained. The reporters at the press conferences rely solely on quotes from Ford owners, accepting them as the final word on their cars. The individuals approached by Irion for interviews in the portable anchor desk spots are at times confused, even frightened by the presence of the news set and of Irion's sudden appearances, as if they were unfamiliar with the journalist's function or had not seen journalism practiced in quite some time. Not so the Ford owners in the press conference spots; uneasy at first, they prove to be quite skilled at handling the reporters' softball questions. Their adroitness suggests that nearly everyone, when confronted by a reporter, is able to speak fluent "sound bite," even when these confrontations are not managed. In both cases, for the individuals on whose responses Irion and the press conference reporters build their stories, the watchdog function of journalism is irrelevant. These journalists have no cultural authority whatsoever.

Journalists in the Ford spots are left to sustain only the "phantom objectivity" discussed by Lukacs.⁵⁷ Outnumbered by skilled public relations professionals and outflanked by savvy subjects, the reporter's zeal to report compellingly from the scene of major events is tempered by the perceived need to entertain the audience and by the financial precariousness of their field. As a result, it is perfectly acceptable to these reporters that all they have to cover are new Fords and to relay a one-sided assessment of their performance. They lack the authority to ask the audience to consider "diverse possibilities" about the cars or consider contextual information about Ford.⁵⁸ In short, Team Detroit and Ford ask us to conclude that journalists have been domesticated, reduced in the ads to asking the questions to which Ford wants only positive answers. In making

news decisions, they legitimize only this kind of staged event in their quest to fill time and space. They are covering a world reordered so that consumption is at the center of our "philosophy of life," as Ewen asserts.

Where a half-century or so ago coverage by journalists "that evaded news management called attention to news management,"⁵⁹ those who manage coverage are now treated more favorably in media content. The skilled public relations professional now shares the marquee with the main actors in a story. The heart of our dominant journalism narrative may no longer be "the press itself in its effort to gather news,"⁶⁰ but rather the journalist giving up the struggle to keep pace with their better-equipped—and better paid—PR counterparts. It is a struggle in which they have been engaged since public relations emerged as a powerful social institution, as Schudson explains. But these ads convey the sense that journalists now feel they can only sit by and watch as the cultural authority of their craft continues to be ceded to entities that persuade and sell. By their inaction they help to finalize this shift. Ford's journalists are content with their new role as promotional tools, as "content creators," their once civic-minded drive to cover news attenuated to sell cars. They are comfortable, as Baym might argue, with the inseparability of journalism and marketing. And perhaps, like a celebrity laboring to stay in the public eye, these fictional journalists are just happy for the publicity, relieved that they are still relevant, even in this disempowered form.

Conclusion

It is reasonable to conclude that Ford and Team Detroit based these "Drive One" ads on interpretations of elements of journalism they believed would encourage a positive product impression in the minds of viewers. But while the aim of Ford and Team Detroit is to sell cars, their efforts are based on a reading of journalism that reflects the fears of those concerned with

the erosion of journalism's cultural authority. It begins with the dual irony that the "honesty and credibility" sought by Van Dyke are obtained by invoking the press conference, a tactic designed and deployed to limit how much of both elements are given to journalists, and parachute journalism, where reporters spend enough time at a location to generate only superficial coverage of a story.

Thus, the journalists depicted in the Ford ads are not the heroic and revered public watchdogs made so famous by Woodward and Bernstein. Instead, the reporters so skillfully managed by Kristen—Kimberly Irion, Dave Holmes, and their crew—travel in packs, ask softball questions, cheer the dexterity with which Ford owners handle their interviews, and dart from story to story without considering the context in which those stories arose or exploring underlying issues in any depth. This suggests a view of journalists as beyond anonymous, as Saltzman might argue.

Ford's version of the journalist is bland and ineffectual—not aggressive or rude, not diligent—not even obnoxious and corrupt. They are neither heroes nor villains; they are inert, colorless, part of the background. Doggedness and the element of surprise have been stripped from their arsenal of tactics. They simply exist, resigned to the constraints placed on their craft. Ford asks us to consider the possibility that public relations professionals have successfully *domesticated* these journalists. The author therefore proposes that the category "domesticated journalist" be added to the typology compiled by Saltzman. These reporters are complicit in the devaluation of their craft—and seem to believe that such superficiality in coverage is what the public needs, as Starr might suggest.

It is troubling that this explanation of journalism now competes for the viewer's attention and may be used by the viewer to form or revise perceptions of the field. While it is true, as one

reviewer noted, that these are the journalists Ford or another carmaker would invite to a product introduction press conference, the ads analyzed for this paper ask us to consider the possibility that the audience might come away believing that this is the caliber of journalists who will be called on to cover *all* stories, including those that might produce information that would benefit the public.

The conduct of Ford's journalists would seem to cry out for corrective rhetorical boundary building by real-life journalists, as happened more than a decade ago when ABC News enlisted actor Leonardo DiCaprio to interview Bill Clinton to mark the anniversary of Earth Day; in fact, unless and until journalism returns to a more revered place in our social structure, it is the author's opinion that *any* use by advertisers of the elements of journalistic practice deserves such a response. The next tasks for researchers, then, are to confirm that this new category of portrayals is found in other journalism-themed texts, and to determine why advertising professionals believe that conveying this particular impression of journalists is advantageous.

Endnotes

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