



# **Fake TV News: Widespread and Undisclosed**

**A multimedia report on  
television newsrooms' use of material  
provided by PR firms on behalf of paying clients**

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# News Release

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## **Press Advisory: New Report: Fake TV News Widespread and Undisclosed**

Investigation catches 77 local TV stations presenting corporate PR as real news  
Groups file complaints urging FCC to take action against deceptive broadcasters

WASHINGTON The Center for Media Democracy and Free Press today exposed an epidemic of fake news infiltrating local television broadcasts across country. At a press conference in Washington with FCC Commissioner Jonathan S. Adelstein, the groups called for a crackdown on stations that present corporate-sponsored videos as genuine news to an unsuspecting audience.

CMD, which unveiled the results of a 10-month investigation, found scores of local stations slipping commercial “video news releases,” or VNRs, into their regular news programming. The new multimedia report released today includes footage of 36 separate VNRs and their broadcast as “news” by TV stations and networks nationwide, including those in the nation’s biggest markets.

The full report -- “Fake TV News: Widespread and Undisclosed” -- is now available complete with VNR and TV station video footage at [www.prwatch.org/fakenews/execsummary](http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/execsummary).

“It’s shocking to see how product placement moves secretly unfiltered from the boardroom to the newsroom and then straight into our living rooms,” said Diane Farsetta, a senior researcher at CMD and co-author of the report. “Local TV broadcasts -- the most popular news source in the United States -- frequently air VNRs without fact-checking, conducting their own reporting, or disclosing that the footage has been provided and sponsored by big corporations”

Investigators captured 77 television stations actively disguising sponsored content from companies including General Motors, Intel, Pfizer and Capital One to make it look like their own reporting. More than one-third of the time, stations aired fake news stories in their entirety as their own reporting.

Despite repeated claims from broadcasters that they do not air VNRs as news, the new report reveals just the tip of the iceberg. Instances of fake TV news documented by CMD likely represent less than 1

percent of VNRs distributed to local newsrooms since June 2005. Fraudulent news reports have likely been aired on hundreds of more local newscasts in the past year.

“The president of the Radio-Television News Directors Association, Barbara Cochran, called fake news ‘kind of like the Loch Ness Monster. Everyone talks about it, but not many people have actually seen it,’ “ said John Stauber, executive director of CMD. “This report drops a big nest of squirming Nessies in the laps of TV journalists. Fake TV news is the worst plagiarism scandal in American journalism, and it must be stopped by labeling all VNRs on screen so viewers can tell if its news or fake news.”

Approximately 80 percent of the stations snared in the investigation are owned by large conglomerates. The list of the worst offenders includes Clear Channel, News Corp./Fox Television, Viacom/CBS, Tribune Co. and Sinclair Broadcast Group - whose Oklahoma City affiliate was caught airing VNRs on six separate occasions.

“The evidence suggests a strong connection between media consolidation and the broadcast of deceptive, pre-packaged propaganda,” said Timothy Karr, campaign director of Free Press. “When all station owners care about is profit margins, fake news can prove irresistible. After all, VNRs are free. Reporting news that’s meaningful to local communities isn’t. And without decisive government action, the fake news problem will only get worse.”

In conjunction with the report, Free Press launched [www.freepress.net/fakenews](http://www.freepress.net/fakenews) -- urging the public to contact the FCC and demand “No Fake News.”

Free Press and CMD also filed a formal complaint with the FCC, seeking a thorough investigation “to help restore the public trust in the integrity of local news.” The public interest groups want all VNRs be accompanied by a continuous, frame-by-frame visual notifications and verbal announcements disclosing their sources. They also recommended broadcasters be required to file monthly public reports detailing their use of government or corporate-sponsored material. The FCC complaint is available at [www.freepress.net/docs/fcc\\_complaint\\_4-06-06.pdf](http://www.freepress.net/docs/fcc_complaint_4-06-06.pdf)

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

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

# Executive Summary

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## **This Report Includes:**

- [Video footage](#) 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](#) showing the locations of the 77 television stations throughout the United States that aired this fake news.
- [An itemized list](#) of the 77 television stations that aired this fake news, by state.

## **In Brief**

Over a ten-month period, the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD) documented television newsrooms' use of 36 [video news releases](#) (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](#) (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](#) in Oklahoma City, OK, a [FOX](#) station owned by [Sinclair](#), 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.



KOKH-25 airs a VNR from Intel

- 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](#) in St. Louis, MO, had their anchor introduce, and their reporter re-voice, a VNR produced for Masterfoods and 1-800 Flowers, following the script nearly verbatim. [WBFS-33](#) in Miami, FL, did the same with a VNR produced for the “professional services firm” Towers Perrin. And [Ohio News Network](#) did likewise with a VNR produced for Siemens.
- [WSJV-28](#) in South Bend, IN, introduced a VNR 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 at the largest U.S. broadcast PR firm, [Medialink Worldwide](#). Another Medialink publicist, Kate Brookes, was presented as an on-air reporter by four TV stations airing a VNR produced for Siemens.
- Two stations whose previous use of government VNRs was documented by the New York Times, [WCIA-3](#) in Champaign, IL, and [WHBQ-13](#) in Memphis, TN, also aired VNRs 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](#). 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.”



From an ad for the broadcast PR firm [D S Simon Productions](#)

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](#) (RTNDA), [Barbara Cochran](#), told a reporter that VNRs were “kind of like the [Loch Ness Monster](#). 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](#) figures. [Syndicated](#) and [network-distributed](#) 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](#) in Harrisonburg, VA, provided [partial disclosure](#), 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-for-word](#).
- 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](#) in Cincinnati, OH; [WSYR-9](#) in Syracuse, NY; and [WYTV-33](#) in Youngstown, OH) [removed safety warnings](#) from a VNR touting a newly-approved prescription skin cream. WSYR-9 also aired [a VNR heralding](#) a "major health breakthrough" for arthritis sufferers—a supplement that a widely-reported government study had found to be little better than a placebo.
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- 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](#) 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](#) to viewers. An anchor at [WLTX-19](#) 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](#), as part of larger public relations campaigns to sell products, burnish their image, or promote policies or actions beneficial to the corporation.

# Introduction

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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 VNR-like segments. These segments 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 segments](#) from NewsProNet, which provides “pre-packaged news reports” to TV stations. 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 ignoring the public interest and betraying the public trust, TV stations airing fake news are effectively plagiarizing from biased and sometimes inaccurate materials. As this report documents, TV newsrooms frequently air, without disclosure, segments comprised of nothing beyond the provided and/or sponsored footage and accompanying script. These practices expose viewers to blatantly promotional—and sometimes misleading—TV news “reports.”

# Findings: Video News Releases

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From June 2005 to March 2006, the Center for Media and Democracy documented television newsrooms' use of selected [video news releases](#) (VNRs) and [satellite media tour](#) (SMT) “interviews.” While these 36 examples represent less than one percent of VNRs offered to newsrooms each year, this report provides the most comprehensive survey of fake TV news to date.

Listed below are each VNR or SMT, along with the client(s) that funded it and a one-sentence description. If you are reading this online, each title links to a page with a fuller description, including the TV stations that aired the fake news segment and Quicktime videos of the VNR and selected newscasts that incorporated it. Offline versions of each article can be found in Appendix B (“VNRs in Detail”, page 41).

## [A Fake News Report About Fake E-Mail](#)

Trend Micro

A software company VNR is nationally syndicated through the Tribune network.

## [Safety Information Sold Separately](#)

Stiefel Laboratories

A pharmaceutical company dodges federal regulations through fake TV news.

## [Work Woes at WBFS-33](#)

Towers Perrin

A Florida newscast uses a station reporter to disguise a VNR as journalism.

## [“Is Your Child Constantly Sick?”](#)

Quest Diagnostics

An L.A. station drops a two-minute medical commercial into their newscast.

## [Shopping Advice from a Store-Bought Expert](#)

Panasonic, Namco, Techno Source

A seemingly-impartial consumer advocate shills for three corporations.

### [A Planted Story on Ethanol Plants](#)

Siemens AG

Five stations run an optimistic news feature that's secretly fueled by profit.

### [Prescription-Strength Spin at WCBS-2](#)

Leiner Health Products

A top-market station turns a corporate VNR into an imbalanced medical feature.

### [A Spitting Image of Genuine News](#)

American Dental Association

The Fox Network adopts a dental industry VNR and distributes it nationally.

### [Changing the Past, One Newscast At a Time](#)

General Motors

Three stations help GM stake a false claim in Internet history.

### [The “Internet Mom” Strikes Again](#)

Texas Instruments, Motorola, Nokia, Swiffer

A TV tech expert is secretly paid to promote consumer electronic products.

### [Steering Wheel Spin On Three Newscasts](#)

Siemens VDO

A fake report on state-of-the-art car mechatronics is purely corporate-driven.

### [Journalistic Malpractice at WSYR-9](#)

Bioibérica

A Clear Channel station inflicts fake and misleading health news on their viewers.

### [Pharma Deception in San Francisco](#)

Pfizer

Half of a station's “medical breakthrough” story comes from a drug company VNR.

### [What's In Your Newscast?](#)

Capital One

An NBC station scams its viewers with an anti-scam VNR from a national bank.

### [At Halloween Time, the Candy Ads Dress Up as News](#)

Masterfoods, 1-800-Flowers

A St. Louis TV reporter does a word-for-word re-voice on a publicist VNR.

### [A Few Good Wrenches](#)

General Motors

Three stations run a VNR designed to help GM recruit young mechanics.

### [Bad Business in Beantown](#)

Toshiba, Fisher Price, Scholastic Media

A New England NBC affiliate serves viewers a Christmas sham.

### [Technology Report Secretly Has Intel Inside](#)

Intel

A Sinclair-owned station keeps deceiving their viewers with fake journalism.

### [VNR Gets Extra Mileage Out of Car Commercial](#)

Cadillac

A news report about a Cadillac ad is actually a Cadillac ad itself.

### [A Press Push for Pancakes](#)

General Mills

Four newscasts deceive their viewers with a stealth ad for Bisquick.

### [Sandwich Spin, Served Up Fresh](#)

Subway

Local stations make a cold cut combo out of a Subway VNR and SMT.

### [Dodge is My Co-Pilot](#)

DaimlerChrysler

Three stations air a VNR that promotes child safety (and Chrysler-brand vehicles).

### [Spinning the Other Way at KYW-3](#)

Bioibérica

A Philadelphia station runs an unlabeled VNR but reverses the story's context.

## Coverage They Can Count On

General Motors

A Michigan newscast delivers an uncut VNR about GM's corporate HQ.

## “Accidental Housewife” Intentionally Hides Her Sponsor Ties

Knowledge Adventure, Brother, Build-A-Bear, Tide-to-Go, Drugstore.com

A TV homemaking expert just happens to love all her clients' products.

## Unfiltered Spin from an Internet Porn-Blocker

NetTrekker

L.A. station adapts a promotional news release about a child-safe search engine.

## Culinary Advice Served From a Can

Hass Avocado Board, Heinz, Canned Food Alliance, Circuit City

On two newscasts, a pair of clowning chefs dish out the paid product promotion.

## Journalism-on-Loan

Sallie Mae

The nation's “#1 paying-for-college” company also pays for favorable news coverage.

## Valarie D’Elia: Frequent Flying Flack

Sandals, Viking River Cruises, Air Tahiti Nui

A travel expert stars in corporate VNRs, then smuggles them into her own TV reports.

## Nashville Station Cheats on Tax Report

Jackson Hewitt

A local ABC news story is secretly filed by a national tax preparation franchise.

## The Buzz Gets a Rush

Victoria's Secret

A morning show that delivers “news with personality” also delivers VNRs with T&A.

## Pay No Attention to the Man Behind the SmartScreen™

AdSpace Networks

A CBS station runs fake report on high-tech mall displays.

### [No Accounting for Ethics](#)

American Institute of Certified Public Accountants

A Southern ABC station runs a rock & roll news story secretly planted by CPAs.

### [A Fresh-Cut Front For the Flower Flacks](#)

Flower Promotion Organization

A planted Valentine's Day report secretly stems from rose peddlers.

### [Inorganic Chemistry at KOKH-25](#)

Chemistry.com

Oklahoma City station runs a fake news feature from an online-dating service.

### [A Ruse By Any Other Name...](#)

Matrixx Initiatives

An NBC station tries to turn a brand-name VNR into a generic news report.

# Findings: TV Stations

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The map below shows the locations of television stations in the United States that have aired a video news release (VNR) and/or satellite media tour (SMT). If you are reading this online, each point on the map links to a page with further information about that station. This information can also be found on CMD's SourceWatch website, at [www.sourcewatch.org](http://www.sourcewatch.org).

The following two pages list each fake news broadcaster by state, including network and ownership information.



STATION	Ntwk	OWNER	City	STATE	# VNRs / SMTs
WBRC-6	Fox	Fox/News Corporation	Birmingham	AL	1
WHNT-19	CBS	New York Times	Huntsville	AL	1
KAIT-8	ABC	Liberty Corporation	Jonesboro	AR	2
KGUN-9	ABC	Journal Broadcast Group	Tucson	AZ	2
KABC-7	ABC	ABC/Disney	Los Angeles	CA	1
KCBS-2	CBS	Viacom	Los Angeles	CA	1
KEYT-3	ABC	Smith Broadcasting Group	Santa Barbara	CA	1
KMAX-31	UPN	Viacom	Sacramento	CA	1
KPIX-5	CBS	Viacom	San Francisco	CA	1
KTLA-5	WB	Tribune Broadcasting	Los Angeles	CA	1
KTXL-40	Fox	Tribune Broadcasting	Sacramento	CA	1
KRDO-13	ABC	Pikes Peak Broadcasting	Colorado Springs	CO	1
KWGN-2	WB	Tribune Broadcasting	Denver	CO	1
The Daily Buzz	Synd.	Acme Communications	National	FL	1
WBBH-2	NBC	Waterman Broadcasting	Ft. Myers	FL	1
WBFS-33	UPN	Viacom	Miami	FL	1
WJXT-4	IND	Post-Newsweek Corporation	Jacksonville	FL	1
WGCL-46	CBS	Meredith Corporation	Atlanta	GA	1
WRDW-12	CBS	Gray Communications	Augusta	GA	1
WTVM-9	ABC	Raycom Media	Columbus	GA	2
KGAN-2	CBS	Sinclair Broadcasting	Cedar Rapids	IA	1
WCIA-3	CBS	Nexstar Broadcasting	Champaign	IL	1
WGN-9	WB	Tribune Broadcasting	Chicago	IL	1
WFXX-38	Fox	Nexstar Broadcasting	Terre Haute	IN	1
WRTV-6	ABC	McGraw-Hill	Indianapolis	IN	1
WSJV-28	Fox	Quincy Newspapers	South Bend	IN	1
WXIN-59	Fox	Tribune Broadcasting	Indianapolis	IN	1
WHAS-11	ABC	Belo Corporation	Louisville	KY	1
KSLA-12	CBS	Raycom Media	Shreveport	LA	1
KTBS-3	ABC	Edwin Wray	Shreveport	LA	1
WBRZ-2	ABC	Manship Media	Baton Rouge	LA	1
WWUE-8	Fox	Emmis Communications	New Orleans	LA	1
WHDH-7	NBC	Sunbeam Television	Boston	MA	1
WBFF-45	Fox	Sinclair Broadcasting	Baltimore	MD	1
WBOC-16	CBS	Draper Communications	Salisbury	MD	3
WLX-10	NBC	Gray Communications	Lansing	MI	2
WJBK-2	Fox	Fox/News Corporation	Detroit	MI	2
WWTV-9	CBS	Heritage Broadcasting Co.	Tustin	MI	1
KAAL-6	ABC	Hubbard Broadcasting	Rochester	MN	1
KFJX-14	Fox	Surtsey Media	Joplin/Pittsburg	MO	1
KTVI-2	Fox	Fox/News Corporation	St. Louis	MO	2
WDAF-4	Fox	Fox/News Corporation	Kansas City	MO	1
WCCB-18	Fox	Bahakel Communications	Charlotte	NC	1
WCTI-12	ABC	Lamco Communications	New Bern	NC	3
WGHP-8	Fox	Fox/News Corporation	Greensboro	NC	1
WLFL-22	WB	Sinclair Broadcasting	Raleigh	NC	1
KASA-2	Fox	Raycom Media	Albuquerque	NM	1
KTNV-13	ABC	Journal Broadcast Group	Las Vegas	NV	1
NY1	Cable	Time Warner	New York	NY	1
WCBS-2	CBS	Viacom	New York	NY	2
WKBW-7	ABC	Granite Broadcasting	Buffalo	NY	1

STATION	Ntwk	OWNER	City	STATE	# VNRs / SMTs
WPIX-11	WB	Tribune Broadcasting	New York	NY	1
WSYR-9	ABC	Clear Channel	Syracuse	NY	1
Ohio News Network	Cable	Dispatch Broadcast Group	Cleveland	OH	1
WCPO-9	ABC	E.W. Scripps Company	Cincinnati	OH	2
WSYX-6	ABC	Sinclair Broadcasting	Columbus	OH	1
WYTV-33	ABC	Chelsey Broadcasting	Youngstown	OH	1
KOKH-25	Fox	Sinclair Broadcasting	Oklahoma City	OK	6
KYW-3	CBS	Viacom	Philadelphia	PA	1
WHP-21	CBS	Clear Channel	Harrisburg	PA	1
WNEP-16	ABC	New York Times	Wilkes-Barre	PA	2
WPGH-53	Fox	Sinclair Broadcasting	Pittsburgh	PA	1
WPMT-43	Fox	Tribune Broadcasting	Harrisburg	PA	1
WPVI-6	ABC	ABC/Disney	Philadelphia	PA	1
WLTX-19	CBS	Gannett Broadcasting	Columbia	SC	1
WHBQ-13	Fox	Fox/News Corporation	Memphis	TN	1
WKRN-2	ABC	Young Broadcasting	Nashville	TN	1
KLBK-13	CBS	Nexstar Broadcasting	Lubbock	TX	3
KLST-8	CBS	Nexstar Broadcasting	San Angelo	TX	2
KOSA-7	CBS	ICA Broadcasting	Odessa	TX	1
KYTX-19	CBS	Max Media of Montana	Tyler	TX	1
KZTV-10	CBS	Eagle Creek Broadcasting	Corpus Christi	TX	1
WFAA-8	ABC	Belo Corporation	Dallas	TX	1
WCYB-5	NBC	BlueStone Television	Bristol	VA	1
WHSV-3	ABC	Gray Communications	Harrisonburg	VA	1
WVTV-8	WB	Sinclair Broadcasting	Milwaukee	WI	1
WVVA-6	NBC	Quincy Newspapers	Bluefield	WV	1

# Findings: Corporations

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Nearly all of the clients behind the [video news releases](#) (VNRs) tracked by the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD)—47 of 49—were corporations. (The [other two](#) were professional associations.) Those 47 corporations were responsible for 34 of [the 36 VNRs](#) documented in this report.



[WCTI-12](#) airs a VNR from DaimlerChrysler

Why are news programs a major target for corporations, even—and especially—for those with large advertising budgets? One reason is what public relations practitioners call the [third party technique](#). Praise for Brand X or for Corporation Y has much more credibility when it's relayed by a seemingly-independent reporter or commentator in a news setting, rather than by an actor in a commercial—or by a corporate spokesperson in any setting. That's especially true, since the level of trust accorded corporations has declined in recent years, according to [bi-annual surveys](#) carried out in the United States and 19 other countries for the World Economic Forum.

Another reason corporations use VNRs and [satellite media tours](#) (SMTs) is that, while television still commands large audiences, TV ads don't. At a March 2006 [conference](#) of the Association for National Advertisers, speakers [admitted](#) that TV viewers are increasingly turning to other media when ads come on, or skipping ads completely by using digital video recorders. Nearly 80 percent of national advertisers believe that TV ads are less effective than they were just two years ago, according to [a survey](#) presented at the conference.



From a VNR from [Masterfoods](#) and [1-800-Flowers](#)

## On TV News, the Ads Never End

Indeed, the vast majority of VNRs documented in this report are little better than ads. Twenty-three of the 36 VNRs prominently featured specific products offered by the client(s) behind the VNR. VNRs in this category include [one](#) produced for [Trend Micro](#) on its Internet security program; [one](#) produced for two clients, [Masterfoods](#) and [1-800-Flowers](#), on Halloween-themed candy and flowers; and [one](#) produced for three clients, [Panasonic](#), [Namco](#) and [Techno Source](#), on their games, gadgets and related products.

Four other VNRs featured services or information related to products offered by the client behind the VNR. VNRs in this category include [one](#) produced for [Sallie Mae](#) on college loans, [one](#) produced for [General Motors](#) on online car shopping, [one](#) produced for Jackson Hewitt (an income tax services company) on tax-deductible donations, and [one](#) produced for [Towers Perrin](#) (a “professional services firm”) on employee management practices.

Two other categories of corporate VNRs shunned the hard sell for a more subtle approach. Three VNRs focused on their client’s good deeds. VNRs in this category include [one](#) produced for [Capital One](#) on the bank’s efforts to protect seniors against financial scams, [one](#) produced for General Motors on its new headquarters in Detroit, and [one](#) produced for [DaimlerChrysler](#) on its child seat safety program. The last four corporate VNRs associated the client with a desirable profession or a cutting-edge product not (or not currently) available to consumers. VNRs in this category include [one](#) produced for General Motors on auto technician jobs, [one](#) produced for [AdSpace Networks](#) on video displays in shopping malls, and two produced for [Siemens](#). [One](#) Siemens VNR hyped future automobile dashboard options;

the company provides electrical and mechanical components to auto manufacturers. The [other](#) VNR promoted ethanol as an alternative fuel for automobiles; Siemens also provides equipment to ethanol plants.

## Sick of Fake TV News

In addition to being [fake news](#)—and therefore bad reporting—VNRs on health issues pose potential dangers to unsuspecting viewers. This report documents two VNRs on prescription drugs, one on a laboratory test, and four others on over-the-counter health remedies or supplements.

The [U.S. Food and Drug Administration](#) (FDA) regulates promotional material from drug manufacturers that mentions a specific product, including VNRs. The FDA requires all such material to provide “fair balance,” or information about drug risks as well as benefits; to be clear that the drug only treats certain conditions and not others; and to provide reporters with the full risk information for the drug. While the FDA cannot possibly review all the VNRs, direct-to-consumer ads and many other promotional materials put out by drug companies, in March 2003 the agency did issue [a warning](#) about “misrepresentations” in a drug company’s press release on its new cancer treatment. In doing so, the FDA asserted its jurisdiction over promotional materials targeted to reporters.

It’s important to note, however, that FDA jurisdiction ends at the newsroom door. That’s good news for the three TV stations that aired [a VNR](#) produced for [Stiefel Laboratories](#). Neither [WCPO-9](#) in Cincinnati, OH, nor [WSYR-9](#) in Syracuse, NY, nor [WYTV-33](#) in Youngstown, OH, included any of the risk information from the VNR in their “report” on Stiefel’s new prescription skin cream. In contrast, the two TV stations that aired [a VNR](#) produced for [Pfizer](#) on its new prescription insulin treatment did include some risk information, though the overall tone of both segments was promotional.



[WYTV-33](#) airs a VNR from [Stiefel Laboratories](#)

Another health-related VNR was produced for [Quest Diagnostics](#), which provides laboratory tests and services. [KABC-7](#) in Los Angeles, CA, aired a segment that was entirely derived from the [Quest VNR](#). It encouraged parents with frequently sick children to have them tested for allergies and mentioned a specific blood test. That test is actually produced by Pharmacia Diagnostics, but Quest and Pharmacia have had a “national co-marketing initiative” for the test since at least 2003. The arrangement helps Pharmacia sell more tests, and helps Quest by “improving patient sales and driving growth,” as Quest’s CEO explained during a January 2005 conference call with investors.

How TV stations used two different VNRs promoting the same supplement from the same company further illustrates the confusion caused when complex medical issues are presented in a brief, corporate-sponsored format. [One VNR](#), produced for the chemical company [Bioibérica](#), was aired by [WSYR-9](#) in East Syracuse, NY in a segment that claimed the company’s supplement was effective in treating arthritis-related joint pain. [The other](#) Bioibérica VNR was aired by two stations, [KYW-3](#) in Philadelphia, PA, and [WFAA-8](#) in Dallas TX, in segments that questioned the supplement’s effectiveness.

This report’s findings on health-related VNRs are consistent with [an academic study](#) published in the American Journal of Managed Care in March 2006. Based on a review of the health segments aired by 122 local TV stations in one month, the study concluded, “Few newscasts provide useful information, and some stories with factually incorrect information and potentially dangerous advice were aired.” The study also noted that “pervasive” health stories that aired in “more than 10 media markets” sometimes included “identical video.”

That’s not surprising. In 2004, more than 80 percent of TV stations were using the same number of or more health-related VNRs than they did in 2003, according to [a survey](#) by the major broadcast PR firm [D S Simon Productions](#). The firm’s chair commented, “Our medical stories are consistently generating more than 100 placements per project per year.

# Recommendations

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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:

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.

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.

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.

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.
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- “*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

# Take Action

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To send a letter to the U.S. Federal Communications Commission urging full disclosure of fake TV news to viewers, go to <http://action.freepress.net/campaign/fakenews>.



Do you work in a newsroom or otherwise have direct knowledge about TV stations, radio stations, print outlets or other media running [fake news](#), without disclosure?

If so, the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD) would love to hear from you!

This report is part of CMD's ongoing efforts to expose and challenge fake news practices. By sharing relevant information, you can help. The more detailed and documented, the better, though any lead is appreciated.

Your confidentiality will be fully guaranteed.

Contact the CMD at:

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# Frequently Asked Questions

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## Video News Release Questions

### What are 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 look and sound like independently-gathered reports, but are designed to promote the products, services, public image and/or point of view of the client(s) who funded them. Broadcast PR firms freely provide VNRs to television newsrooms, and often contact newsrooms to encourage them to include the segments in their programs.

### Aren't VNRs just the video equivalent of print press releases?

No. While print press releases are primarily a tool to attract the attention of journalists, VNRs are often used to replace journalists entirely. Of the 87 times that the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD) documented TV stations airing VNRs, stations only added independently-gathered footage or information to the segment in seven instances. Every other time, the aired report was built entirely from the VNR footage and script. Thirty-one times, TV stations aired the entire pre-packaged VNR without a single edit.

### What's wrong with TV newsrooms using VNRs?

Viewers have a right to know where their news comes from. For instance, CMD documented three TV stations airing a [VNR](#) about a prescription skin cream that was funded by the pharmaceutical company that makes the cream. None of the stations disclosed the source of the segment to their viewers.

That's against the [ethical guidelines](#) of the [Radio-Television News Directors Association](#), which state, “News managers and producers should clearly disclose the origin of information and label all material provided by corporate or other non-editorial sources.”

Of the 87 instances of VNR use documented by CMD, [only once](#) was there partial disclosure; the TV station identified the broadcast PR firm, but not the paying client, behind the VNR. In all other cases, the stations failed to include any disclosure. Worse, every TV station actively disguised VNRs as their own journalistic products. That's a direct violation of professional guidelines and a betrayal of the public trust.

### **How long have TV stations been using VNRs?**

By most accounts, VNRs have been in use for some 25 years. According to a November 1983 New York Times article by Kirk Johnson, “Most big public relations firms now have video departments that produce video news releases for use by local television stations.”

### **Don't most VNRs come from government agencies?**

No, though the focus of recent debates has been government-produced and/or -funded VNRs, such as [the VNRs](#) produced for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to promote changes to the Medicare program. However, the vast majority of VNR clients are private entities. In May 2004, the chair of the largest U.S. broadcast PR firm, [Medialink Worldwide](#), told PR Tactics magazine that government agencies account for only five percent of his business; the rest comes from corporations, PR firms and non-profit organizations.

### **What kind of companies use VNRs for favorable news coverage?**

Of the VNRs that CMD tracked, 47 of the 49 sponsors were [corporations](#) selling everything from [candy](#) and [flowers](#) to [insulin](#) and [TV displays](#) for shopping malls. Some companies, such as General Motors, used VNRs to recruit [auto technicians](#) and to promote GM as the pioneer of [online car shopping](#)—a demonstrably false claim.

### **How are VNRs announced and distributed to TV stations?**

Broadcast PR firms announce their VNR offerings to TV news producers through phone, fax and e-mail pitches. The VNRs themselves are distributed by videotape, by satellite transmission, or through digital content delivery systems such as [Pathfire](#), which allow newsrooms to preview and download VNRs in a matter of minutes.

### **How many VNRs are provided to TV stations each year?**

Although the VNR industry is large and influential, there's not much information available on it. In March 2005, the New York Times [noted](#) that Medialink “produces and distributes about 1,000 video news releases a year, most commissioned by major corporations.” A December 2000 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 reported that “5,000 to 15,000 VNRs are distributed each year.”

### **Are TV stations aware that they're using VNRs?**

In the few occasions where a TV station has [been exposed](#) for airing a VNR without disclosure, the news director has often claimed that the station was unaware of the source of the footage. For the hundreds of VNRs and VNR announcements that CMD analyzed for this report, the broadcast PR firms

clearly and accurately disclosed the client and funding information each time. It is possible—though it seems unlikely—that this information may be removed by TV station personnel before the VNR reaches the newsroom. However, it does seem likely that client information may not be relayed to local stations when a network-distributed or syndicated segment incorporates a VNR.

### **How do TV stations disguise VNRs as their own reports?**

Beyond failing to reveal the true sponsor(s) and author(s) of the segment to news audiences, TV stations use the following techniques to make VNRs appear as though they are their own, independently-gathered reports:

*Station-branded graphics:* In every VNR broadcast that CMD documented, the TV station altered the VNR’s appearance by adding network-branded graphics and text overlays. When airing a VNR from a medical company, [KABC-7](#) in Los Angeles recreated a VNR graphic, using the station’s formatting, as shown below:



Original VNR graphic (left), and KABC-7 newscast (right)

*Station re-voice:* In more than 60 percent of the VNR broadcasts documented by CMD, the TV station had a local reporter replace the original VNR narration with their own. Sometimes local reporters followed the original VNR script word-for-word (examples [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). Sometimes, the station anchor introduced a local reporter, who then presented the VNR as if she or he produced and investigated it (examples [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

*Introducing publicists as reporters:* In nearly half of the instances where CMD documented TV stations airing VNRs with the publicist’s narration, the station anchor introduced the publicist by name, implying that they were reporters. In one instance, this misrepresentation was stated outright. An anchor at [WSJV-28](#) in South Bend, IN, introduced a VNR’s narrator as “[FOX’s Andrew Schmertz](#),” even though Schmertz was a Medialink publicist working on behalf of General Motors. Such techniques, in addition to the lack of disclosure, make it impossible for viewers to tell the difference between legitimate news reports and sponsored promotional segments.

### **Why do TV newsrooms use VNRs?**

Although the local TV news business is extremely lucrative (pre-tax profit margins can go as high as [40 to 50 percent](#)), the companies that own TV stations have been expanding news programming without adding news personnel. As a result, stations increasingly air provided material. Every minute a station airs a VNR, it saves considerable time and money by not having to produce, film and edit its own footage. The financial factors behind VNR usage are detailed in the “[Introduction](#)” section of this report.

### **Why don't TV stations disclose VNRs to news audiences?**

The only people who can definitively answer this question are news personnel at TV stations that air VNRs. However, it seems safe to assume that one factor is not wishing to admit to news audiences that the station airs provided, sponsored footage.

### **Weren't VNRs recently found to be propaganda?**

In 2005, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) [ruled](#) that any government-produced and/or -funded VNR that does not make its source clear to news audiences constitutes illegal [covert propaganda](#). This ruling does not apply to VNRs from private entities. In addition, the U.S. Justice Department and Office of Management and Budget rejected the GAO ruling, claiming that government VNRs are permissible as long as they are “informational.”

### **Who has the authority to regulate VNRs?**

The U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has jurisdiction over all television and radio broadcasters. In its April 2005 [Public Notice](#) on VNRs, the FCC reminded broadcasters that the Federal Communications Act requires them to “inform their audience, at the time of airing: (1) that such matter is sponsored, paid for or furnished, either in whole or in part; and (2) by whom or on whose behalf such consideration was supplied.”

## **Satellite Media Tour Questions**

### **What is a satellite media tour (SMT)?**

A SMT is an organized series of interviews funded by one or more clients. While the interview format allows local TV station anchors to have some input, the focus and scope of the segment are determined by the client(s), making them little more than live recitations of VNRs. SMTs documented by CMD promoted everything from [chain restaurants](#) to [stain removers](#). In [one SMT](#), the interviewee recommended against products from the SMT clients' competitors.

## **What's wrong with TV newsrooms using SMTs?**

The public has a right to know where their news—including interviews—comes from. If TV stations don't disclose the client(s) behind an SMT, viewers will believe they're getting unbiased advice or information from an independent authoritative source, when in truth they're receiving little more than covert advertising.

Of the 11 SMT “interviews” documented in this report, only one station provided partial disclosure to its audience. An anchor at [WLTX-19](#) in Columbia, SC, said the segment was “[provided by vendors](#),” but did not name the four corporations behind the SMT.

If they're interviews, can't the TV station ask whatever questions they want?

Yes, theoretically, but in all 11 SMT examples documented by CMD, there were no critical questions. In each case, the station anchor did not even attempt to deviate from the script that showcased the SMT clients' products.

## **How are SMTs related to VNRs?**

SMTs and VNRs are often two complementary aspects of larger PR campaigns. Every SMT documented in this report was released in conjunction with a related VNR featuring the same product(s) and talking points.

## **How are SMTs pitched to TV stations?**

Similar to VNRs, broadcast PR firms announce their SMT offerings to TV news producers through phone, fax and e-mail pitches. However, unlike VNRs, which can aired simultaneously on multiple stations, SMTs have to be arranged to avoid scheduling conflicts.

How do TV stations disguise SMTs as independent interviews?

TV stations simply fail to disclose the endorsement arrangement between the interview subjects and the companies who sponsored the SMT—crucial information that would allow news audiences to better evaluate the interviewee's statements.

## **The Fake News Issue**

### **Why is this issue so important?**

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 VNRs as though they are their own independently researched reports, and present SMTs as if they were interviews with impartial experts.

This consistent failure to disclose “fake news” means that even the most media savvy people aren’t able to evaluate the quality or integrity of TV news. While lack of disclosure may not seem important for a VNR promoting lip gloss, it certainly is for VNRs promoting [health supplements](#) and [prescription drugs](#). Moreover, lack of disclosure is a breach of the public trust and a serious lapse in journalistic ethics.

### **Isn’t there any way to tell which segments are fake TV news?**

Unfortunately, there’s no foolproof method for viewers to identify provided VNR footage or sponsored SMT “interviews.” Broadcast PR firms are adroit at getting across their clients’ messages while maintaining a TV news-like tone, and some TV news is bad or even promotional, without being sponsored by undisclosed clients. To make matters even more confusing, this report documents TV stations adding [some VNR footage](#) to other footage the station generated itself, and—in two cases—editing out [all](#) or [nearly all](#) of the VNR’s promotional aspects. Without full disclosure, there’s simply no way to know.

However, if you happen to see [Robin Raskin](#), [Julie Edelman](#) or [Valarie D’Elia](#) on your TV screen, be wary. They’re “experts” who have done VNRs and/or SMTs through [D S Simon Productions](#). And if you see a report presented by [Kate Brookes](#), [Mike Morris](#), or [Andrew Schmertz](#), change the channel. They’re publicists who narrate Medialink’s VNRs.

# Appendix A: About this Report

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Interview requests, questions and other correspondence related to this report should be directed to the Center for Media and Democracy:

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**Madison, WI 53703**

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< <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/execsummary> >.

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# Appendix B: VNRs in Detail

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## A Fake News Report About Fake E-Mail

Software company VNR is nationally syndicated through the Tribune network



On November 3, 2005, [KOKH-25](#) (Oklahoma City, OK) ran a two-minute story on “phishing” scams: fraudulent e-mails designed by identity thieves to trick people into divulging personal financial information. The news report featured testimony from Jessica Sweedler, a Bay Area phishing victim; Mikael Niehoff, a technology crime unit detective; and David Perry, and a computer security expert from [Trend Micro Software](#). In no uncertain terms, the report recommended PC-Cilin, a \$50 Internet security program from Trend Micro, as “a first line of defense” against phishing scams.

What viewers couldn’t have possibly known is that the KOKH-25 story was a scam in itself. The report was actually a [video news release](#) (VNR) created by [D S Simon Productions](#) and funded by Trend Micro. Without a hint of attribution, KOKH-25 dropped the complete and uncut VNR into their 9:00 PM newscast. To help disguise the promotional video as their own journalism, editors at KOKH-25 inserted station-branded text overlays and anchor Andrew Speno introduced the VNR’s narrating publicist, Jim Lawrence, as if he were a local reporter.

Along with KOKH-25, the VNR was picked up by [Kurt Knutsson](#), a [KTLA-5](#) (Los Angeles, CA) technology reporter whose “[CyberGuy](#)” segments are syndicated through the [Tribune Broadcasting Network](#) on newscasts in over 150 markets.

On November 9, Knutsson introduced his own edited version of the VNR, a shorter remix with new

scene transitions, background music, and a re-dubbed voiceover provided by Knutsson himself. Although he kept in every mention of PC-Cilin, Knuttson failed to inform viewers that his entire story was provided by a broadcast PR firm and funded by the makers of the software being featured. In addition to his KTLA-5 studio report, Knuttson appeared live via satellite on stations in at least four other cities, including [WPIX-11](#) (New York, NY), [WGN-9](#) (Chicago, IL), [KWGN-2](#) (Denver, CO), and [WXIN-59](#) (Indianapolis, IN).

A station-edited cut of the VNR also appeared on [KRDO-13](#) (Colorado Springs, CO), while an uncut version aired on [KAIT-8](#) (Jonesboro, AR). Yet another unedited version of the VNR, revoiced by station reporter [Margie Ellisor](#), aired on [KTVI-2](#) (St. Louis, MO). In October, the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD) had documented KTVI-2 incorporating [a Halloween VNR](#) from Masterfoods and 1-800-Flowers, again enlisting Ellisor to provide a reporter re-voice.

Of all these stations, none disclosed Trend Micro as the funding source of the story. In the course of its ten-month study, CMD has observed KOKH-25 airing corporate-funded VNRs on six separate occasions. Along with Trend Micro, the station has aired VNRs from [Panasonic](#), [Intel](#), [Cadillac](#), [Chemistry.com](#), and [Towers Perrin](#), all without attribution.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[KAIT-8, ABC](#)

Jonesboro, Arkansas

Liberty Corporation

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[KOKH-25, FOX](#)

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Sinclair Broadcasting

---

[KRDO-13, ABC](#)

Colorado Springs, Colorado

Pikes Peak Broadcasting

---

[KTLA-5, WB](#)

Los Angeles, California

Tribune Broadcasting

---

[KTVI-2, FOX](#)

St. Louis, Missouri

Fox/News Corporation

---

[KWGN-2, WB](#)

Greenwood Village, Colorado

Tribune Broadcasting

---

[WGN-9, WB](#)

Chicago, Illinois

Tribune Broadcasting

---

[WPIX-11, WB](#)

New York, New York

Tribune Broadcasting

---

[WXIN-59, FOX](#)

Indianapolis, Indiana

Tribune Broadcasting

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## Safety Information Sold Separately

### Pharmaceutical company dodges federal regulations through fake TV news



Since 1997, the [U.S. Food and Drug Administration](#) (FDA) has allowed pharmaceutical companies to [advertise](#) their products on television. But in exchange, the FDA requires their commercials to include “fair balance,” important safety information about possible adverse reactions and medical conflicts (also known as contraindications).

While the FDA also requires pharmaceutical [video news releases](#) (VNRs) to provide fair balance, TV stations aren’t held to the same requirements in their news reports. As a result, the drug giants rely on ethically-challenged newsrooms to not just deliver their product’s selling points through undisclosed VNRs, but to edit out the safety warnings that might dissuade viewers from considering their new remedy.

On December 19, 2005, [WYTV-33](#) (Youngstown, OH) ran an 80-second news feature on [Mimyx](#), a prescription skin cream that was recently approved by the FDA to treat atopic dermatitis, more commonly known as eczema. In addition to several product shots of Mimyx, the story included glowing testimony from [Dr. Joseph Fowler](#), a clinical professor at the University of Louisville and a practicing dermatologist.

WYTV’s viewers were denied two crucial pieces of information. The first is that the entire story was lifted straight from a VNR created by [MultiVu](#) on behalf of [Stiefel Laboratories](#), the makers of Mimyx. To erase the dotted line between the station and the story’s corporate source, producers added WYTV-branded text overlays and enlisted their own health reporter, [Len Rome](#), to introduce and narrate the piece as if he had investigated it himself.

Secondly, the original MultiVu package included thirty seconds of federally-mandated contraindication warnings at the very end. WYTV's audience never got to see or hear this information, since it was omitted from Rome's report. Remarkably, the aired story was even less balanced than the VNR it came from.

The MimyX news release also found its way onto two other ABC stations: [WCPO-9](#) (Cincinnati, OH) and [WSYR-9](#) (Syracuse, NY), a station the Center For Media and Democracy had previously observed airing a [covert VNR](#) on arthritis supplements.

Like WYTV-33, both stations disguised the VNR as their own investigative report, and both stations failed to include the contraindication warnings that came with the original VNR.

Click on the links below to watch video of the VNR, the contraindication warnings, and the WYTV and WCPO newscasts.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[WCPO-9, ABC](#)

Cincinnati, Ohio

E.W. Scripps Company

---

[WSYR-9, ABC](#)

East Syracuse, New York

Clear Channel

---

[WYTV-33, ABC](#)

Youngstown, Ohio

Chelsey Broadcasting

---

Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## Work Woes at WBFS-33

### South Florida newscast uses a station reporter to disguise corporate PR as journalism



**Client(s):** Towers Perrin  
**Released:** March 2006  
**Aired By:** 2 stations  
**Disclosed By:** No stations

On March 20, 2006, [WBFS-33](#) took active steps to deceive its morning audience. The Miami/Fort Lauderdale UPN affiliate ran a taped segment on job dissatisfaction that—unbeknownst to viewers—was lifted frame-by-frame from a [video news release](#) (VNR) funded by a worldwide management consulting firm.

To help position themselves as a leading expert in workforce efficiency, [Towers Perrin](#) hired [D S Simon Productions](#) to create a two-minute news-like VNR on how companies can increase their rate of employee retention. The segment included advice from two managing directors at Towers Perrin, and quoted numerous figures from a Towers Perrin workplace survey.

The VNR was announced and distributed to newsrooms on March 15. Five days later, under the banner of “WORK WOES,” WBFS morning anchors [Jade Alexander](#) and [Angela Rae](#) introduced the VNR as if it were a genuine station report. To further mask the VNR as their own journalism, editors at WBFS inserted network-branded graphics and enlisted an unnamed staff reporter to replace the narrative voiceover of D S Simon’s [Sonia Martin](#).

Despite the adjustments, the WBFS story matched the original VNR shot-for-shot, and the reporter re-voice followed the [original publicist script](#) (PDF) word-for-word. At no time did Alexander, Rae or anyone else of WBFS disclose to viewers that the story was entirely paid for and provided by Towers Perrin.

The VNR was also incorporated into the March 16 newscast of [KOKH-25](#), (Oklahoma City, OK). The station has been observed on five other occasions airing complete and undisclosed VNRs from [Trend Micro Software](#), [Panasonic](#), [Intel](#), [Cadillac](#), and [Chemistry.com](#).

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[KOKH-25, FOX](#)

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Sinclair Broadcasting

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[WBFS-33, UPN](#)

Miami, Florida

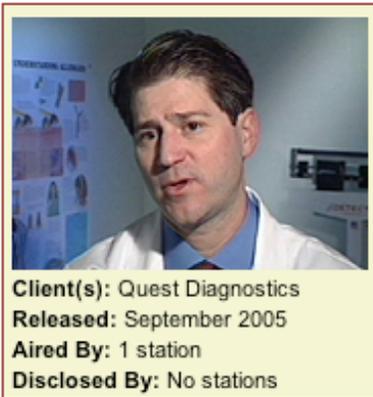
Viacom

---

Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## “Is Your Child Constantly Sick?”

### Los Angeles station drops a two-minute medical commercial into their newscast



On September 27, 2005, [KABC-7](#) in Los Angeles aired a two-minute news segment on a blood test that can help diagnose allergies in children. What the station didn't tell its viewers was that the entire story was built from a [video news release](#) (VNR) funded by [Quest Diagnostics](#). While Quest does not make the allergy test (Pharmacia Diagnostics does), Quest runs thousands of lab centers across the United States where people go to have such tests done.

The VNR, entitled “Is Your Child Constantly Sick?” was created by [MultiVu](#) and distributed to TV newsrooms on September 21.

In adapting the story, producers at KABC-7 edited the VNR slightly for length and rearranged the order of clips and soundbites. To help disguise the VNR as a product of their station, KABC-7 swapped the narrative audio of the MutliVu publicist with the voice of an unidentified station reporter, and replaced all text and graphic displays with network-branded substitutes:



Graphic display, as it appears on the original Quest Diagnostics VNR (left), and on the KABC-7 newscast (right).

Beyond failing to disclose the corporate source behind their “report,” KABC-7 neglected to balance the VNR with any of their own journalism. Every single piece of information contained in the feature came

straight from the VNR itself. The station merely took a two-minute commercial for a medical test, dressed it up, and passed it off on their unsuspecting viewers as news.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[KABC-7, ABC](#)

Glendale, California

ABC/Disney

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## Shopping Advice from a Store-Bought Expert

### At holiday time, a seemingly-impartial consumer advocate shills for three corporations



**Client(s):** Panasonic, Namco, Techno Source

**Released:** November 2005

**Aired By:** 9 stations

**Disclosed By:** No stations

On December 2, 2005, [WPGH-53](#) (Pittsburgh, PA) ran a holiday feature on the best and worst high-tech gifts for children. In it, technology expert and “Internet Mom” [Robin Raskin](#) warned parents about two potentially dangerous items on the market while praising four that are safe and fun for kids.

What WPGH’s viewers didn’t know is that the story was actually a [video news release](#) (VNR) created by [D S Simon Productions](#) and jointly funded by [Panasonic](#), [Namco](#) and [Techno Source](#). By no coincidence, all of the products Raskin recommends—the Oxyride battery, the Pac-Man and We Love Katamari games, and the Coleco retro gaming system—come from either Panasonic, Namco or Techno Source.

Even more insidious, the two products Raskin deems unsafe—Apple’s Video iPod and Tiger Telematics’ Gizmondo handheld gaming device—are direct commercial competitors of two of the three VNR sponsors. Panasonic offers a rival line of MP3 players while Techno Source battles Tiger Telematics in the handheld gaming market.

By itself, this VNR is little more than a tri-company infomercial that plugs numerous products while trashing its competitors. And yet when laundered through credibility of TV journalism, viewers are deceived into thinking they’re watching an independent news report with an impartial consumer expert. Of the seven stations who incorporated the VNR into their newscasts, none disclosed the funding source of the story. In addition to WPGH-53, three stations—[KOKH-25](#) (Oklahoma City, OK), [KTBS-3](#) (Shreveport, LA) and [WCTI-12](#) (New Bern, NC)—ran the VNR without a single edit, introducing the narrating publicist, [Sonia Martin](#), as if she were a reporter at the station. Three additional newscasts—[WLFL-22](#) (Raleigh, NC), [WSYX-6](#) (Columbus, OH) and [WPVI-6](#) (Philadelphia, PA)—deceptively weaved pieces of the Raskin VNR into their own stories. The investigative reporter at WSYX-6, [Kent](#)

[Justice](#), blended a full minute of the VNR into his regular consumer segment, ironically called “On Your Side.”

In addition to the VNR, Raskin appeared live in a [satellite media tour](#) (SMT), a coordinated series of remote interviews in which a subject interacts directly with the station anchors. The SMT, like the VNR, was coordinated by D S Simon Productions on behalf of Panasonic, Namco and Techno Source. Two stations, [KGUN-9](#) (Tucson, AZ) and [WBRC-6](#) (Birmingham, AL), ran the live SMT without informing viewers that Raskin’s appearance was funded by the makers of the very products she was praising.

A month after the Raskin “interview,” [KGUN-9](#) aired [another SMT](#) featuring homemaking expert [Julie Edelman](#), which was sponsored by five different corporations. [WCTI-12](#) subsequently aired fake news reports from [Sallie Mae](#) and [DaimlerChrysler](#). And this report documents [KOKH-25](#) running unlabeled VNRs on five additional occasions, for [Trend Micro Software](#), [Intel](#), [Cadillac](#), [Chemistry.com](#) and [Towers Perrin](#).

Robin Raskin was also the featured expert in a [technology SMT](#) sponsored by Motorola, Nokia, Texas Instruments and Swiffer. It aired live on three stations.

Update: [WBRC-6](#)’s station news director Mike McClain has responded to the Center for Media and Democracy. See our [WBRC-6 Sourcewatch page](#) for details.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR/SMT as real news:

[KGUN-9, ABC](#)

Tucson, Arizona

Journal Broadcast Group

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[KOKH-25, FOX](#)

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Sinclair Broadcasting

---

[KTBS-3, ABC](#)

Shreveport, Louisiana

Edwin Wray

---

[WBRC-6, FOX](#)

Birmingham, Alabama  
Fox/News Corporation

---

[WCTI-12, ABC](#)

New Bern, North Carolina  
Lamco Communications

---

[WLFL-22, WB](#)

Raleigh, North Carolina  
Sinclair Broadcasting

---

[WPGH-53, FOX](#)

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
Sinclair Broadcasting

---

[WPVI-6, ABC](#)

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
ABC/Disney

---

[WSYX-6, ABC](#)

Columbus, Ohio  
Sinclair Broadcasting

---

Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## A Planted Story on Ethanol Plants

### Five stations run an optimistic news feature that's secretly fueled by profit



If you thought your job was tough, try being [Kate Brookes](#), a local ABC news reporter in Nevada, a CBS reporter in Texas, a Fox reporter in Missouri, and an ABC reporter (again) in Louisiana. Actually, Brookes isn't a reporter at all. She just plays one on TV. In reality, she's a publicist for [Medialink](#), the world's first and largest provider of [video news releases](#) (VNRs). And yet, many TV stations have no problem adopting her into their newscasts as if she were one of their own.

In January 2006, Medialink sent Brookes to Iowa to shoot a VNR on the "Ethanol boom," the growing trend of using corn-based fuel as an alternative energy source. The two-minute feature included all-positive testimony from two industry experts, an ethanol plant builder, and a local corn farmer. One can assume that Medialink didn't hold Brookes to any standards of journalistic objectivity, considering that the VNR was funded by [Siemens AG](#), a worldwide engineering corporation who supplies process automation systems to [two-thirds of the ethanol plants](#) in the United States.



Medialink publicist Kate Brookes, as she appears on the original VNR (left), on KTNV-13 in Las Vegas (center), and on KFJX-14 in Joplin, Missouri (right).

The VNR was distributed to TV newsrooms on January 13. Over the next week, five stations—[KOSA-7](#) (Odessa, TX), [KTNV-13](#) (Las Vegas, NV), [WBRZ-2](#) (Baton Rouge, LA), [WCIA-3](#) (Champaign, IL) and [KFJX-14](#) (Joplin, MO)—blended the story into their newscast, replacing all visuals with network-branded graphics and introducing Brookes as if she were on their news team. All five stations inserted custom-branded text overlays onto the video, and each station edited the story slightly for length, except for KFJX-14, which ran a complete and uncut version of the VNR.

None of the stations supplemented the VNR with original reporting, or even alluded to the [scientific](#), [economic](#) or [environmental](#) debates about ethanol. Worst of all, not a single station told their viewers that the story was produced by publicists and funded by a corporation with a direct financial stake in the ethanol business.

In the same month, Kate Brookes narrated a [second VNR](#) from Medialink and Siemens, about the company's line of state-of-the-art car components.

To view the original VNR, as well as the KTNV news story, click on the Quicktime links below.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[KFJX-14, FOX](#)

Pittsburg, Kansas

Surtsey Media

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[KOSA-7, CBS](#)

Odessa, Texas

ICA Broadcasting

---

[KTNV-13, ABC](#)

Las Vegas, Nevada

Journal Broadcast Group

---

[WBRZ-2, ABC](#)

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Manship Media

---

[WCIA-3, CBS](#)

Champaign, Illinois

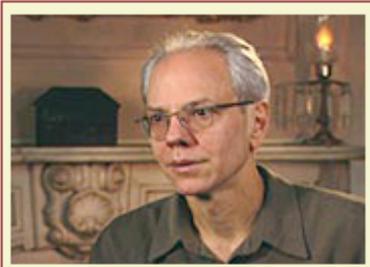
Nexstar Broadcasting

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## Prescription-Strength Spin at WCBS-2

### Top-market station turns a corporate news release into an unbalanced medical feature



**Client(s):** Leiner Health Products  
**Released:** February 2006  
**Aired By:** 2 stations  
**Disclosed By:** No stations

On February 22, 2006, [WCBS-2](#) in New York City aired an 84-second health feature on glucosamine and chondroitin sulfate, two over-the-counter nutritional supplements that, according to anchor Jim Rosenfield, “deliver a one-two punch to ease the pain” of people suffering from moderate to severe knee osteoarthritis.

In addition to citing a newly-published report in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the WCBS segment included positive testimony from Jeff Van Nostrand, an osteoarthritis patient who was helped by glucosamine/chondroitin; [Pamela Peeke](#), an assistant professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine; and [Dr. Thomas Vangsness](#), a professor of orthopedic surgery at the University of Southern California.

What WCBS didn’t tell its viewers is that every shot, fact and soundbite in their story was taken directly from a [video news release](#) (VNR) created by [MultiVu](#) and funded by [Leiner Health Products](#), a company that markets a combination glucosamine/chondroitin supplement.

Producers at WCBS edited the original VNR for content and length, added station-branded text overlays and replaced the MultiVu publicist’s narration with the voice of an unidentified station reporter. Disturbingly, the WCBS story wasn’t supplemented by any additional footage or research. Had anyone at the newsroom even glanced at [the abstract](#) of the *New England Journal of Medicine* report, they would have seen the good news about the supplements tempered by the following conclusion:

Glucosamine and chondroitin sulfate alone or in combination did not reduce pain effectively in the overall group of patients with osteoarthritis of the knee.

Unlike WCBS, the New York Times took the report’s findings as bad news for chondroitin and glucosamine. Their February 23 article from science reporter Gina Kolata was titled “[Supplements Fail to Stop Arthritis Pain, Study Says](#)” (registration required).

Whatever the truth may be about the effectiveness of these two supplements, the viewers of America’s third most-watched local newscast were tricked into believing they were seeing an independently-researched health report that examined all sides of the issue—not just the corporate side.

On the same day as the WCBS report, the Leiner Health Products VNR was also aired by [WNEP-16](#), the ABC affiliate in northeastern Pennsylvania. Like WCBS, the station ran an edited version of the VNR with a reporter re-voice. And like WCBS, nobody at the network disclosed MultiVu or Leiner as the true source of the story.

The Center for Media and Democracy has tracked two additional VNRs promoting chondroitin sulfate. Both VNRs were created by [D S Simon Productions](#) on behalf of [Bioibérica](#), an international supplier of the chondroitin supplement. Although the [first VNR](#) was aired uncritically by a Syracuse ABC station, the [second VNR](#) was actually used in a negative context by newscasts in Philadelphia and Dallas.

Update: in response to this report, WNEP-13 has issued [an apology and explanation](#) for their unattributed use of the Leiner Health Products VNR.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[WCBS-2, CBS](#)

New York, New York

Viacom

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[WNEP-16, ABC](#)

Moosic, Pennsylvania

New York Times

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## A Spitting Image of Genuine News

### FOX Network adopts dental industry VNR and distributes it nationally to affiliates



On June 10, 2005, [KTXL-40](#) (Sacramento, CA) ran a 90-second news segment on a new dental technique that can test a person for potential diseases through their own saliva samples. After a quick intro, anchor Shana Franklin tossed the story to [FOX News](#) Channel’s [Julie Banderas](#), who “shows us how regular visits to the dentist’s office could one day be a thing of the past.”

Unfortunately the story came straight from the mouths of dentists themselves. The KTXL-40 story was built almost exclusively from a [video news release](#) (VNR) that was created by [MultiVu](#) on behalf of the [American Dental Association](#) (ADA).

Within hours of the VNR’s release, producers at FOX Broadcasting headquarters in New York re-edited and re-packaged the VNR, enlisting one of their national correspondents to replace the narrating voice of the MultiVu publicist. Of the 90-second FOX edit, 79 seconds of footage came straight from the original VNR. The remaining 12 seconds were pulled from a press conference hosted by the ADA. FOX failed to supplement or balance the VNR with independent journalism.

It appears as though FOX’s version of the VNR was distributed to the 130 U.S. affiliates owned by News Corporation. Along with KTXL-40, the VNR was aired by at least five other FOX affiliates: [KASA-2](#) (Albuquerque, NM), [WVUE-8](#) (New Orleans, LA), [WHBQ-13](#) (Memphis, TN), [WGHP-8](#) (Greensboro, NC), and [WDAF-4](#) (Kansas City, MO).

Additionally, the original VNR was picked up by three stations: [WRTV-6](#) (Indianapolis, IN), [WHAS-11](#) (Louisville, KY) and [KMAX-31](#) (Sacramento, CA). Like the FOX affiliates, all three newsrooms masked the VNR as their own journalism, garnishing the video with custom-branded graphics and enlisting a station reporter to replace the narrative voiceover provided by the MultiVu publicist.

Of the nine stations who incorporated the VNR, no one identified the ADA or MultiVu as the source of their story.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[KASA-2, FOX](#)

Albuquerque, New Mexico

Raycom Media

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[KMAX-31, UPN](#)

Sacramento, California

Viacom

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[KTXL-40, FOX](#)

Sacramento, California

Tribune Broadcasting

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[WDAF-4, FOX](#)

Kansas City, Missouri

Fox/News Corporation

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[WGHP-8, FOX](#)

Greensboro, North Carolina

Fox/News Corporation

---

[WHAS-11, ABC](#)

Louisville, Kentucky

Belo Corporation

---

[WHBQ-13, FOX](#)

Memphis, Tennessee

Fox/News Corporation

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[WRTV-6, ABC](#)

Indianapolis, Indiana

McGraw-Hill

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[WVUE-8, FOX](#)

New Orleans, Louisiana

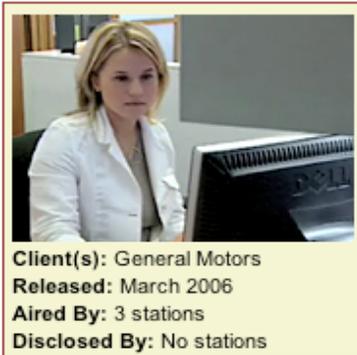
Emmis Communications

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## Changing the Past, One Newscast At a Time

### Through planted news, three stations help GM stake a false claim in Internet history



In a 24-hour period, three TV stations in three different states ran a news report that marked the 10-year anniversary of Internet car shopping. The story chronicled the vast changes that have occurred in the car-buying process since [General Motors](#) (GM) launched the first auto manufacturer web site in 1996. Unbeknownst to viewers, both the news report and the historical claim came straight from GM itself, and both are fake.

On March 1, 2006, [Medialink](#) distributed a [video news release](#) (VNR) to television newsrooms on behalf of their client, General Motors. The two-minute promotional feature included soundbites from James Bell, the publisher of [Intellichoice.com](#); Cindy McColley, a brand manager for GM; and Ted Lynhart, a GM/Pontiac dealer who has since appeared in a [second VNR](#) from General Motors. Additionally, the audio narrative—provided by Medialink’s [Kate Brookes](#)—establishes GM’s place in Internet lore while announcing new low prices on all their vehicles:

“GM, who introduced the first manufacturer web site in 1996, has recently lowered prices, in some cases by thousands of dollars, on all of their models as a direct result of the customers’ ability to comparison shop on the Internet.”

The complete and uncut VNR was blended into the morning newscasts of [KSLA-12](#) (Shreveport, LA) and [WBOC-16](#) (Salisbury, PA). A slightly-edited version was used in the evening broadcast of [WPMT-43](#) (Harrisburg, PA). All three stations kept the original voice of Kate Brookes, introducing her as if she were a staff reporter. Nobody at any of the three newscasts revealed to their viewers that the story was provided by Medialink and funded by GM.

Worse, no one attempted to fact-check GM’s claim as the first car manufacturer to establish an online presence. A simple dated search for “automotive web site” in the Nexis news database revealed a press release from August 1995 in which Volkswagen heralded the launch of their web portal. It wasn’t until

February 1996 that General Motors announced gm.com in their own press release.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[KSLA-12, CBS](#)

Shreveport, Louisiana

Raycom Media

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[WBOC-16, CBS](#)

Salisbury, Maryland

Draper Communications

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[WPMT-43, FOX](#)

York, Pennsylvania

Tribune Broadcasting

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## The “Internet Mom” Strikes Again

### TV technology expert is secretly paid to promote consumer electronic products



[Robin Raskin](#) has admittedly earned her reputation as a technology guru. The former editor-in-chief of Family PC magazine, she’s authored six books on parenting in the digital age and has testified before the Federal Trade Commission on Internet safety issues.

Unfortunately, she’s demonstrated time and again that her credibility is for sale. Dubbed by one insider as “[the VNR Queen](#),” Raskin has appeared on dozens of fake news segments as a seemingly impartial expert, offering praise for various gizmos and gadgets while secretly in the employ of the gadgetmakers themselves.

On January 4, Raskin appeared live via satellite on three consecutive newscasts to discuss the hottest items from the 2006 Consumer Electronics Show. From a remote studio in Las Vegas, she showcased a Nokia bluetooth phone, a Motorola cordless communication center, a big-screen TV featuring Texas Instruments’ Digital Light Projection technology and—in a jarring shift to the low-tech world—a Swiffer duster.

Although the stations billed her as a “Technology Journalist and Consultant,” Raskin’s choices were hardly unbiased. Her appearance was part of a [satellite media tour](#) (SMT) arranged by [D S Simon Productions](#) and jointly funded by Nokia, Motorola, Texas Instruments and Swiffer.

Of the three stations who participated in the SMT with Raskin, two of them—[KEYT-3](#) (Santa Barbara, CA) and [WCYB-5](#) (Bristol, VA)—failed to divulge Raskin’s endorsement arrangement to their audience. At [WLTX-19](#) (Columbia, SC), anchor Curtis Wilson closed the interview by telling viewers, “In the interest of full disclosure, we want to mention that this interview with Robin was provided by vendors at the consumer trade show.”

Not to split hairs, but one would think “full disclosure” would mean naming the companies who sponsored Raskin’s appearance—a crucial distinction that would have helped viewers consider the

interview in its proper context.

Still, even Wilson's partial disclosure was an exceedingly rare event in the Center for Media and Democracy's (CMD) ten-month study. Out of 98 documented instances of VNR and SMT usage, CMD observed only two stations attempting to divulge the sponsored nature of the content to viewers. The [other acknowledgement](#), like Wilson's, still failed to disclose the funding source behind the material. CMD had previously documented Raskin in a [holiday VNR and SMT campaign](#) that was jointly-funded by Panasonic, Namco and Techno Source.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this SMT as real news:

[KEYT-3, ABC](#)

Santa Barbara, California  
Smith Broadcasting Group

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[WCYB-5, NBC](#)

Bristol, Virginia  
BlueStone Television

---

[WLTX-19, CBS](#)

Columbia, South Carolina  
Gannett Broadcasting

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## Steering Wheel Spin On Three Newscasts

### Fake report on state-of-the-art car mechatronics is purely corporate-driven



On January 31, the [Ohio News Network](#) devoted nearly two minutes to a story on the “Car Cockpit of the Future,” modular automotive devices that allow vehicle owners to customize and upgrade their car’s electronic controls. Unfortunately the story itself was plug-and-play propaganda engineered by publicists and funded by the corporation who manufactures the very high-tech devices featured in the report.

On behalf of [Siemens VDO](#), a “leading international supplier of automotive electronics and mechatronics,” [Medialink](#) created a 92-second [video news release](#) (VNR) about the company’s new modular car components. “Reported” by Medialink publicist [Kate Brookes](#), the segment featured positive soundbites from James Bayley, an executive at [Siemens VDO](#), as well as [Alan Taylor](#), a renowned automotive expert and contributing editor at Car & Driver magazine.

To help TV stations disguise VNRs as legitimate journalism, Medialink and its competitors typically encode the narrative voiceover of the publicist on a separate audio track, allowing newsroom editors to easily swap in the more familiar voice of a station reporter. The Ohio News Network, a 24-hour cable channel available throughout the state, took advantage of this feature by replacing Kate Brookes with the voice of ONN correspondent [Eleanor Hayes](#). Sadly, Hayes re-read the Medialink script word-for-word, failing to add any context or journalistic balance to the material. Also missing was source disclosure. At no point did ONN reveal to viewers that every word, every fact, and every frame of the story came straight from Medialink and Siemens VDO.

The “Cockpit of the Future” VNR was also picked up by [KLBK-13](#) (Lubbock, TX) and [WBOC-16](#) (Salisbury, MD). Both stations deceptively wove the complete and uncut VNR into their broadcasts, using the original voice of Kate Brookes and having anchors introduce her as if she were a local reporter. Neither newscast revealed the true funding source of the story.

Brookes had previously appeared in an [ethanol-related VNR](#) from Siemens and Medialink that was picked up by five stations.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[KLBK-13, CBS](#)

Lubbock, Texas

Nexstar Broadcasting

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[Ohio News Network](#)

Columbus, Ohio

Dispatch Broadcast Group

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[WBOC-16, CBS](#)

Salisbury, Maryland

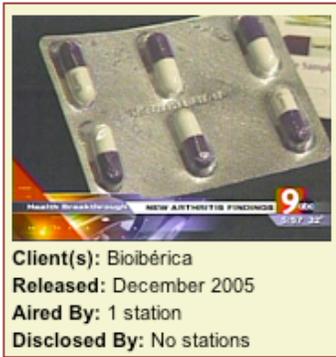
Draper Communications

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## Journalistic Malpractice at WSYR-9

### Clear Channel station inflicts fake and misleading health news on their viewers



On December 26, 2005, [WSYR-9](#)—the [Clear Channel](#) ABC affiliate in Syracuse, New York—ran a 90-second story on chondroitin sulfate, a dietary supplement made from animal cartilage that’s marketed as an over-the-counter pain remedy for arthritis. While trumpeting chondroitin sulfate as a “major health breakthrough,” the segment included positive testimony from Jason Matley, a 30-year old arthritis patient, and Nicholas DiNubile, an orthopedic surgeon. The story cited the results of a major National Institutes of Health (NIH) study that suggested certain supplements—including chondroitin sulfate—were effective in relieving knee joint pain.

What WSYR-9 failed to disclose is that the story was actually funded by [Bioibérica](#), a Spanish chemical company who—by no coincidence—is a major international supplier of chondroitin sulfate. Bioibérica hired [D S Simon Productions](#) to produce and distribute a news-like story about the effectiveness of their product.

WSYR-9 adopted the VNR as their own work, editing it for length, inserting station-branded text overlays, and enlisting their own health reporter, [Carrie Lazarus](#), to introduce and narrate the story as if she had researched it herself.

If Lazarus actually had looked at the [data from the NIH study](#) (PDF), her reporting didn’t reflect it. According to the NIH, chondroitin sulfate, when taken alone, barely outperformed a placebo. The [video news release](#) (VNR) cherry-picked and skewed the NIH results, which indicated that a combination of supplements showed some promising results among a subgroup of arthritics.

But even if she were bad with numbers, Lazarus could have done a simple news search on chondroitin sulfate, which would have taken her straight to a [Washington Post article](#) from November 22. In it, reporter Elizabeth Agnvall quotes Daniel Clegg, the head of the NIH study, as saying:

“The first take-home message is that in the overall study population, none of the supplements were better than placebo[.]”

Sadly, Lazarus and her colleagues at WSYR-9 neglected to do even basic research on the story they were airing. Not only did they deceive their audience with a well-disguised corporate advertisement, they failed to provide the proper context and balance that comes from bonafide journalism.

In February 2006, D S Simon released an [updated version](#) of the VNR on behalf of Bioibérica. It was adopted by two stations that, unlike WSYR-9, used the material to build stories that were critical of chondroitin sulfate.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[WSYR-9, ABC](#)

East Syracuse, New York

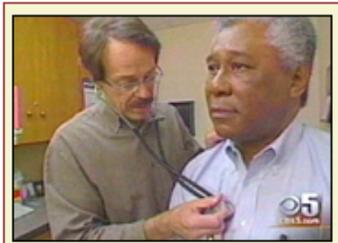
Clear Channel

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## Pharma Deception in San Francisco

### Half of station's "medical breakthrough" story came straight from Pfizer



Client(s): Pfizer  
Released: January 2006  
Aired By: 2 stations  
Disclosed By: No stations

On January 27, [KPIX-5](#) in San Francisco devoted nearly three minutes to [Exubera](#), the first inhalable insulin treatment for Type-1 and Type-2 diabetes approved by the [U.S. Food and Drug Administration](#) (FDA). While any viewer could see that the CBS report had nothing but praise for the new [Pfizer](#) product, they might be surprised to learn that half the praise was supplied by Pfizer itself.

In anticipation of FDA approval, the drug giant contracted [MultiVu](#) to create a [video news release](#) (VNR) about Exubera. The promotional story package included strongly positive soundbites from the medical director of a Texas diabetes clinic, as well as diabetics who participated in the Exubera clinical trial.

In its 10:00 PM feature, KPIX-5 began with legitimate reporting—a look at the San Jose company that spent 20 years developing needle-free insulin delivery. But the rest of the report alternated between original station-gathered footage and canned material from the VNR, with no disclaimer to viewers that some of the video was provided by the makers of Exubera.

Worse, a full 38 seconds of [contraindication information](#) provided by MultiVu—the safety information about possible adverse reactions that's required by the FDA—was boiled down to an eight-second aside by KPIX reporter [Thuy Vu](#).

The day before the KPIX-5 report, [KAAL-6](#) (Rochester, MN) ran a ninety-second story on Exubera that was built entirely from the Pfizer VNR, without any form of disclosure to viewers. However, the station's health reporter spent considerably more time on the contraindications than KPIX-5.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[KAAL-6, ABC](#)

Austin, Minnesota

Hubbard Broadcasting

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[KPIX-5, CBS](#)

San Francisco, California

Viacom

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## What's In Your Newscast?

### Florida NBC affiliate scams its viewers with anti-scam VNR from Capital One



On November 2, 2005, [WBBH-2](#) in Ft. Myers, Florida, aired a two-minute, seven-second segment on the rising threat of “elderfraud,” which is when sophisticated criminals bilk vulnerable retirees out of their hard-earned savings. However, WBBH-2 committed journalistic fraud when the station failed to inform its viewers that the story was taken directly from a [video news release](#) (VNR) produced by the broadcast PR firm [MultiVu](#) and funded by [Capital One](#).

The VNR was just one part of an extended campaign to make Capital One look like a bank that’s truly concerned about an individual’s financial security. Although the segment doesn’t directly promote any specific product or service, it repeatedly manages to drop in the Capital One brand name, and refers viewers to an informational website that’s co-sponsored by the bank.

To its credit, the VNR does contain useful tips for seniors on how to avoid scams, enough so that WBBH-2 might not have even been embarrassed by disclosing the true source of their news piece. Unfortunately, the station chose to disguise the VNR as their own journalistic product.

WBBH-2 ran the complete VNR without a single edit, leaving in the narrative voice of the MultiVu publicist. To help make the story look like a legitimate station report, editors inserted network-branded text and graphics onto the video.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[WBBH-2, NBC](#)

Ft. Myers, Florida

Waterman Broadcasting

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## At Halloween Time, the Candy Ads Dress Up as News

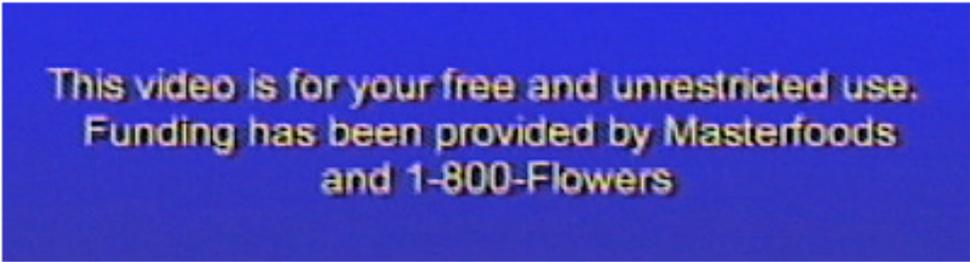
### St. Louis TV reporter does word-for-word re-voice on publicist VNR



On October 28, 2005, [KTVI-2](#) (St. Louis, MO) aired a two-minute segment on how to plan a fun and safe Halloween for your kids. The story, which featured numerous tips from “lifestyle expert” [Julie Edelman](#), was teeming with product shots for brand name candies such as Snickers and M&Ms, as well as a Halloween bouquet arrangement from [1-800-Flowers](#).

What viewers didn’t know is that the whole story was lifted straight from a [video news release](#) (VNR) created by [D S Simon Productions](#) and jointly funded by [Masterfoods](#) (formerly the M&M/Mars Company) and 1-800-Flowers.

In the few occasions where a TV station has [been exposed](#) for airing a VNR without disclosure, the news director has often claimed that the station was unaware of the source of the footage. But in the course of its ten-month study, the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD) studied hundreds of VNRs and VNR announcements and found—without exception—that the PR firms had clearly and accurately divulged the complete client funding information. D S Simon includes this disclosure in several different sections of their VNRs, most notably in the opening title slates:



This video is for your free and unrestricted use.  
Funding has been provided by Masterfoods  
and 1-800-Flowers

It’s extremely unlikely that KTVI-2 missed this information. Either way, the disclosure never made it to viewers. The station followed [the script](#) provided by D S Simon nearly word-for-word, but enlisted one of their own reporters, [Margie Ellisor](#), to replace the publicist’s narration. They also branded the feature with station graphics, furthering the illusion that this was a legitimate KTVI-2 story.

The VNR also aired in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on October 28. [WVTV-18](#), a WB affiliate, ran the complete and unedited VNR, including the publicist's original narration. Like KTVI-2, the station failed to disclose to viewers that the story was bought and paid for by two major corporations. To view the entire KTVI-2 news segment as well as the original VNR, click on the images below. Additionally, CMD has uncovered another [VNR](#) and an [SMT](#) featuring "expert" Julie Edelman.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[KTVI-2, FOX](#)

St. Louis, Missouri

Fox/News Corporation

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[WVTV-18, WB](#)

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Sinclair Broadcasting

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## A Few Good Wrenches

### Three stations run a fake news story designed to help GM recruit young auto technicians



**Client(s):** General Motors

**Released:** March 2006

**Aired By:** 3 stations

**Disclosed By:** No stations

For the past several years, the U.S. automobile industry has anticipated a debilitating shortage of [qualified auto technicians](#). The problem, beyond increasing demand, is that [fewer American teenagers](#) are choosing a career in car repair, apparently turned off by the “[grease monkey](#)” stereotype associated with auto mechanics.

To counter both the staffing and image problem, automakers have stepped up [their efforts](#) to recruit high school students. Some, like [General Motors \(GM\)](#), have used TV news to help push their agenda. In March 2006, GM hired [Medialink Worldwide](#) to create a [video news release \(VNR\)](#) about the demands and rewards (mostly the rewards) of being a modern auto technician. The nearly two-minute fake news feature included positive soundbites from Bob Slovey, a GM Goodwrench manager; Ted Lynhart, a GM auto dealer; and Kevin Reinhardt, a young car repair technician. The VNR concluded with a referral to [the website](#) of the Automotive Youth Educational Systems, a non-profit partnership between automakers, auto dealers, and over 400 U.S. high schools.

The VNR was blended into the newscasts of three different stations. Two of them—[KOSA-7](#) (Odessa, TX) and [WSJV-28](#) (Elkhart, IN)—ran the story complete and uncut with the original voice of the narrating Medialink publicist, [Andrew Schmertz](#). At WSJV-28, anchor Steve DuVal introduced the narrator as “FOX’s Andrew Schmertz.”

The third station, [WWTV-9](#) (Cadillac, MI), edited the VNR slightly for length and enlisted a reporter to re-voice the original narrative audio. At no point did any of the three newscasts divulge to viewers that the entire news feature was produced by Medialink and funded by General Motors.

KOSA-7 had previously been observed airing a complete VNR about ethanol fuel that was funded by [Siemens AG](#). Additionally, the Center for Media and Democracy has monitored the use of two other

VNRs from General Motors and Medialink, one about the [company's headquarters in Detroit](#) and the other about [online car shopping](#).

Update: WSJV-28's station news director Ed Kral has responded to the Center for Media and Democracy. See our [WSJV-28 station page](#) for details.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[KOSA-7, CBS](#)

Odessa, Texas

ICA Broadcasting

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[WSJV-28, FOX](#)

Elkhart, Indiana

Quincy Newspapers

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[WWTW-9, CBS](#)

Cadillac, Michigan

Heritage Broadcasting Co.

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## Bad Business in Beantown

### New England NBC affiliate serves viewers a Christmas sham



On December 20, 2005, [WHDH-7](#) in Boston recut, re-voiced and repurposed a Christmas-themed [video news release](#) (VNR) from three consumer corporations.

The two-minute “news” segment, created by [D S Simon Productions](#), was yet another story about the latest high-tech gadgets that Americans are buying their children this holiday season. In it, parenting expert and veteran VNR personality [Julie Edelman](#) discusses several “no can go wrong” gifts, including the [Fisher-Price](#) PowerWheels Mini-SUV, the [Toshiba](#) portable DVD player, and the Maya bilingual talking doll from [Scholastic](#). On December 19, D S Simon distributed the VNR free-of-charge to news stations across the country, clearly indicating that the material was jointly funded by Fisher-Price, Toshiba and Scholastic.

Sadly, the people at WHDH-7 disguised the VNR as their own news product, sprucing up the video with station-branded graphics, fancy split-screen transitions, and an upbeat holiday soundtrack. They also replaced the narrating voice of the original D S Simon publicist with that of their own reporter, [Christa Delcamp](#). Curiously missing from the new embellishments was a simple disclaimer letting viewers know that the story was produced and paid for by the makers of the very products being showcased.

Julie Edelman had previously been observed giving her seemingly-unbiased product advice in a [Halloween VNR](#) from Masterfoods and 1-800-Flowers, as well as a holiday [satellite media tour](#) sponsored by five different corporations.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[WHDH-7, NBC](#)

Boston, Massachusetts

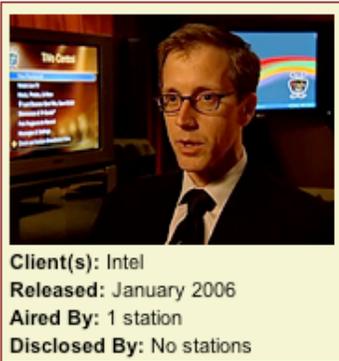
Sunbeam Television

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## Technology Report Secretly Has Intel Inside

### Sinclair-owned station keeps deceiving their viewers with fake journalism



On January 3, 2006, [KOKH-25](#) in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, aired a two-and-a-half minute feature on the latest advances in Internet-capable television, a sunny report in which new technologies give consumers “access to entertainment they can control on their own terms.”

The only new technology featured in the report, however, is the Viiv™ media network platform from [Intel](#). That’s no surprise, considering that the entire story was taken from a [video news release](#) (VNR) created by [D S Simon Productions](#) and funded by Intel.

KOKH-25 modified the VNR by editing the order of soundbites and inserting network-branded graphics over the video, but they left in the narrating voice of the D S Simon publicist [Sue Berg](#). KOKH-25 anchors failed to identify to viewers Berg’s affiliation with the company during the segment’s introduction. They also failed to disclose that every shot, soundbite and piece of information featured in the story came from D S Simon or Intel.

In the course of the ten-month study, the Center for Media and Democracy has observed KOKH-25 airing unsourced VNRs on five separate occasions, for [Trend Micro Software](#), [Panasonic](#), [Cadillac](#), [Chemistry.com](#) and [Towers Perrin](#).

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

#### [KOKH-25, FOX](#)

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma  
Sinclair Broadcasting

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## VNR Gets Extra Mileage Out of Car Commercial

### News report about a Cadillac ad is actually a Cadillac ad itself



When it comes to the Super Bowl, it seems the game itself has taken a back seat to the advertisements. But when it comes to Super Bowl ads, [video news releases](#) (VNRs) often ride shotgun.

In January 2006, [Cadillac](#) hired [Medialink Worldwide](#) to create a VNR around the making of their Super Bowl ad. The 80-second fake news feature—voiced by Medialink publicist [Drew Maxwell](#)—included comments from Jim Taylor, general manager of Cadillac, and Tor Myhren, the [Leo Burnett](#) ad executive who helped develop the commercial. Interspersed throughout the VNR was the entire commercial itself, as well as ample shots of the Cadillac Escalade.

The story was announced to TV newsrooms on January 24. Of the four stations who incorporated the VNR into their newscasts, two of them—[KAIT-8](#) (Jonesboro, AR) and [KOKH-25](#) (Oklahoma City, OK)—ran the package in its entirety. Editors at both stations inserted network-branded graphics into the video to make it look like their own report, and anchors at both newscasts introduced Maxwell as if he were a station correspondent.

[KZTV-10](#) (Corpus Christi, TX) created a 45-second edit of the VNR, inserting station-branded graphics and replacing Maxwell's narration with the familiar voice of their own reporter. [WJBK-2](#) in Detroit incorporated 36 seconds of the VNR into a larger story about Super Bowl commercials. None of the four stations cited Medialink or Cadillac as the source of their video.

The Center for Media and Democracy had previously observed [KAIT-8](#) running a complete and uncut VNR from [Trend Micro Software](#). [WZBK-2](#) had previously aired an edited VNR from [NetTrekker](#), an Internet search engine. And [KOKH-25](#) has been caught on five separate occasions deceptively blending complete VNRs into their newscasts, from [Trend Micro Software](#), [Panasonic](#), [Intel](#), [Chemistry.com](#), and [Towers Perrin](#).

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[KAIT-8, ABC](#)

Jonesboro, Arkansas

Liberty Corporation

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[KOKH-25, FOX](#)

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Sinclair Broadcasting

---

[KZTV-10, CBS](#)

Corpus Christi, Texas

Eagle Creek Broadcasting

---

[WJBK-2, FOX](#)

Southfield, Michigan

Fox/News Corporation

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## A Press Push for Pancakes

### Four newscasts deceive their viewers with a stealth ad for Bisquick



**Client(s):** General Mills/Bisquick  
**Released:** March 2006  
**Aired By:** 4 stations  
**Disclosed By:** No stations

Betty Crocker wants you to know that flapjacks aren't just for breakfast anymore. To help spread the word, [General Mills](#)—the mega-conglomerate behind both the Betty Crocker and Bisquick brands—enlisted [Medialink Worldwide](#) to create a [video news release](#) (VNR) about the versatility of pancakes.

The 75-second fake news segment, strategically designed to coincide with National Pancake Week, featured creative new ideas for pancake dishes such as Mexican corncakes, orange toffee pancakes, banana split pancakes, and PB&J shortstacks. On the self-promotion side, the story included multiple soundbites from Bisquick's Maggie Gilbert, who plugged the company's HeartSmart line of low-fat, zero-cholesterol pancake mix and referred viewers to [BettyCrocker.com](#) for additional pancake recipes.

The VNR was distributed to newsrooms on March 1, 2006. Over the next six days, four affiliates—[KYTX-19](#) (Tyler, TX), [WBOC-16](#) (Salisbury, MD), [WFXW-38](#) (Farmersburg, IN) and [WILX-10](#) (Lansing, MI)—blended the complete and uncut VNR into their broadcasts, inserting station-branded text overlays and introducing Medialink “reporter” Mike Morris as if he were a journalist on staff. At no time did anyone at any of these newscasts reveal to viewers that the story was provided by Medialink and funded by Bisquick.



Medialink publicist Mike Morris, as he appears on the VNR (left), on WBOC-16 in Salisbury, MD (center) and on WFXW-38 in Farmersburg, IL (right).

Of the four stations, three had been previously observed incorporating fake news into their broadcasts without disclosure. KTYX-19 had participated in a [satellite media tour](#) (SMT) interview funded by Brother, Tide and three other companies, plus a [VNR/SMT combination](#) from Subway. WBOC-16 had aired complete VNRs from [Siemens](#) and [General Motors](#). And WILX-10 had deceptively incorporated a complete VNR on [Detroit's Renaissance Center](#), which was also sponsored by General Motors.

One fact that all four newscasts ignored: National Pancake Week was first established in 1985 by General Mills and Bisquick.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[KTYX-19, CBS](#)

Tyler, Texas

Max Media of Montana

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[WBOC-16, CBS](#)

Salisbury, Maryland

Draper Communications

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[WFXW-38, FOX](#)

Farmersburg, Indiana

Nexstar Broadcasting

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[WILX-10, NBC](#)

Lansing, Michigan

Gray Communications

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## Sandwich Spin, Served Up Fresh

### Local stations make a cold cut combo out of a Subway VNR and SMT



Ever since Jared Fogle lost 245 pounds in one year, [Subway](#) has embarked on a marketing strategy unique among fast-food chains—that their sandwiches can help you slim down. In January 2006, the company enlisted the [Fleishman-Hillard](#) PR firm to spearhead their “[Fresh Resolution](#)” program, a month-long campaign to make Subway part of the public’s perennial resolve to lose weight in the new year. The campaign—launched with “an exclusive Dec. 27 story pitched to the Associated Press”—sought to boost sales during January and February, the “‘slow months’ for the fast-food business,” according to the March 2006 O’Dwyer’s PR Report.

Fleishman-Hillard, in turn, contracted [D S Simon Productions](#) to create both a [video news release](#) (VNR) and a [satellite media tour](#) (SMT) revolving around the Fresh Resolutions promotion. While the VNR was a simple fake health news feature that primarily starred Fogle, the SMT was a double-act: a live remote interview with Fogle and [Audrey Cross](#), an associate clinical professor of public health at Columbia University.

In a ten-day period, four different stations used a combination of the VNR and the SMT to build a news feature. [KGAN-2](#) (Cedar Rapids, IA), [KTYX-19](#) (Tyler, TX) and [WJXT-4](#) (Jacksonville, FL) ran segments that were mostly built from the VNR, with recorded soundbites from a satellite interview edited into the story. In all three cases, the station used branded graphics to disguise the video as their own product, and enlisted an in-house reporter to revoice the narrative audio provided by D S Simon publicist Jim Lawrence.

[WHP-21](#), the CBS affiliate in Harrisburg, PA, was the only station to air a live remote interview with Fogle and Cross, but editors intermittently mixed in footage from the VNR.

None of the stations divulged to viewers that Subway was the funding source for the video news footage and the satellite interview. It may have seemed obvious to some, since Fogle is a nationally-

recognized spokesman for Subway. But the fact remains that D S Simon used a Columbia University professor and a health news angle to blur the line between reporting and advertising, and four TV newscasts happily played along.

WHP-21 was subsequently observed airing a [Valentine's Day VNR](#) sponsored by a floral industry trade alliance. KTYX-19 is featured twice more in this report, once for a participating in a [holiday-themed SMT](#) funded by five different companies, and once for incorporating a complete [VNR on pancakes](#) sponsored by General Mills/Bisquick.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR/SMT as real news:

[KGAN-2, CBS](#)

Cedar Rapids, Iowa  
Sinclair Broadcasting

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[KTYX-19, CBS](#)

Tyler, Texas  
Max Media of Montana

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[WHP-21, CBS](#)

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania  
Clear Channel

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[WJXT-4, IND](#)

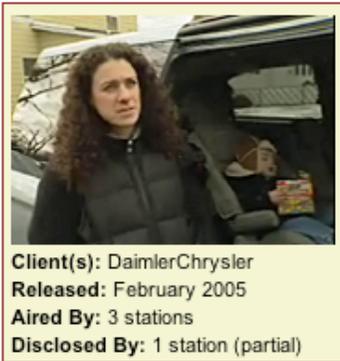
Jacksonville, Florida  
Post-Newsweek Corporation

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## Dodge is My Co-Pilot

### Three stations air VNR that promotes child safety (and Chrysler-brand vehicles)



For over 20 years, the second week of February has been [National Child Passenger Safety Week](#), giving local newscasts a chance to shelve terror-alert stories and focus on a more realistic threat to children: auto accidents.

To coincide with National Child Passenger Safety Week, the [DaimlerChrysler Group](#) hired [D S Simon Productions](#) to create a [video news release](#) (VNR) about the risk of improperly-installed child car seats. The 110-second video package—which included soundbites from a concerned young mother and a Jeep/Dodge service specialist—centered around DaimlerChrysler’s [Fit For a Kid](#) program. Established in 1999, the service allows owners of any vehicle to visit a participating Chrysler/Jeep/Dodge dealer for a free safety inspection of their car’s child seat.

The VNR was used by three southeastern ABC affiliates. Two of them—[WCTI-12](#) (New Bern, NC) and [WTVM-9](#) (Columbus, GA)—ran the complete VNR in their newscast, introducing D S Simon publicist [Sonia Martin](#) as if she were a reporter on staff. Both newscasts inserted station-branded text overlays into the segment, and both failed to disclose D S Simon or DaimlerChrysler as the source of the story. This isn’t the first journalistic lapse of either affiliate. WCTI-12 had previously been observed airing undisclosed VNRs from [Sallie Mae](#) and [Panasonic](#), while WTVM-9 had deceptively incorporated a complete and uncut VNR from the [American Institute of Certified Public Accountants](#).

A third station, [WHSV-3](#) (Harrisonburg, VA), edited the DaimlerChrysler VNR for length and enlisted a station reporter to re-voice Sonia Martin’s narration. Through a four-second text overlay, the newscast revealed that the story was supplied by D S Simon Productions. This is the second and final example of source disclosure that the Center for Media and Democracy has observed out of 98 documented instances of fake news usage (the first example can be found [here](#)). But despite the rare and commendable display of honesty from WHSV-3, the station still failed to divulge DaimlerChrysler as the financial sponsor of the report, an important distinction considering that the average viewer has no idea that D S Simon Productions is a broadcast PR firm.

While potentially beneficial to the public at large, the Fit For a Kid program is still part of a strategic marketing effort to make DaimlerChrysler a trusted brand among safety-conscious parents. Any promotional materials related to the program—especially self-produced news reports—should be fully disclosed.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[WCTI-12, ABC](#)

New Bern, North Carolina

Lamco Communications

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[WHSV-3, ABC](#)

Harrisonburg, Virginia

Gray Communications

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[WTVM-9, ABC](#)

Columbus, Georgia

Raycom Media

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## Spinning the Other Way at KYW-3

### Philadelphia station runs an unlabeled VNR but reverses the story's context



For clients and their publicists, [video news releases](#) (VNRs) have always been a gambling proposition, since TV stations aren't obligated to use the material. And if a newsroom does air a VNR, producers have full freedom to alter the story in whatever way they see fit, even if it negates the VNR's original promotional message.

That's exactly what happened on February 22, 2006, when [KYW-3](#) (Philadelphia, PA) took a promotional news release on chondroitin sulfate—a nutritional supplement—and turned it into a “thumbs-down” news report on chondroitin's ineffectiveness in treating joint pain from osteoarthritis.

The original VNR, created by [D S Simon Productions](#) and funded by [Bioibérica](#) (a Barcelona-based company that sells chondroitin sulfate on the global market), was a retread of a [VNR](#) released two months earlier. The story was updated to include mention of a just-released [New England Journal of Medicine report](#), plus new soundbites from orthopedic surgeon Nicholas DiNubile. As with the previous version, the VNR included positive testimony from 30-year old arthritis patient Jason Matley, and revolved around the central thesis that chondroitin sulfate outperformed prescription painkillers in treating moderate to severe osteoarthritis.

Unlike [WSYR-9](#), the Syracuse station who had uncritically adopted the first Bioibérica VNR, Philadelphia's KYW-3 clearly took issue with the company's claim. In introducing the story, evening anchor Alycia Lane told viewers that “a popular supplement gets the thumbs-down.” Soon after, KYW-3 health reporter Stephanie Stahl elaborated that “a sweeping new study says they don't work,” referring to both chondroitin and glucosamine, another over-the-counter remedy that was tested in the clinical trial.

Although the facts were on KYW's side (the study did indeed conclude that the two supplements [weren't much more effective than placebos](#) among the overall trial population), the station used highly

deceptive editing to turn the Bioibérica VNR into its own counterargument. After identifying Matley as “typical of the millions who take glucosamine and chondroitin,” the newscast inserted a 5-second quote from him:

“I was in pain every time I moved.”

Without access to the original VNR, viewers at home had no way of hearing Matley’s soundbite in its original context:

“Before I started to take the supplement, the biggest thing was walking. I was in pain every time I moved.”

Additionally, Stahl introduced DiNubile as one of the “many who are questioning this study,” when in reality he offered no soundbites to that effect.

While it’s reassuring that KYW-3 refused to blindly follow the premise of a corporate VNR, the station still incorporated a fake news report into their own health story without proper attribution. And they mangled quotes out of context to fit their preferred (albeit more accurate) narrative, when traditional journalistic analysis would have achieved the same effect.

The Bioibérica VNR also appeared on [WFAA-8](#) in Dallas, Texas. Like KYW-3, the station chose to use the VNR in a negative context, though not as deceptively. The newscast merely ran silent video of the VNR in the foreground while a station reporter read from her own narrative. Neither WFAA-8 or KYW-3 identified D S Simon and Bioibérica as the source of the video, a violation of the Radio-Television News Direction Association’s [ethical guidelines](#).

On the very same day as the KYW-3 and WFAA-8 story, [WCBS-2](#) in New York City ran a chondroitin/glucosamine report that was built entirely from the [VNR of Leiner Health Products](#), a competitor of Bioibérica. The company was much more fortunate in their results, as the VNR was used in a completely uncritical context.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[KYW-3, CBS](#)

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Viacom

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[WFAA-8, ABC](#)

Dallas, Texas

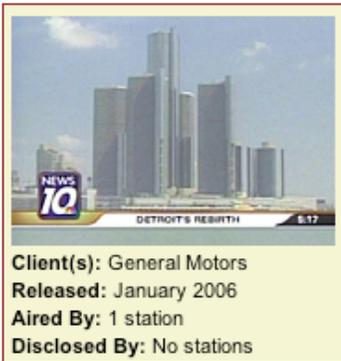
Belo Corporation

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## Coverage They Can Count On

### Michigan newscast delivers an uncut VNR about GM's corporate headquarters



On January 24, 2006, [General Motors](#) (GM) wrote a love letter to itself and [WILX-10](#) delivered it to viewers without a single edit.

In its 5:00 PM newscast, the NBC affiliate in Lansing, Michigan, devoted nearly three minutes to a packaged feature on the Renaissance Center, the landmark Detroit complex that GM acquired in 1996 and turned into its worldwide corporate headquarters. The timely news hook, in this case, is that the building would soon be serving as the international media headquarters for Super Bowl XL.

Dubbing the RenCen as “the architectural icon of Detroit” and the “symbol for the city’s rebirth,” the report included soundbites from John Gallagher, the architecture critic for the Detroit Free Press, and Matthew Cullen, an executive with General Motors. Both men happily asserted that GM’s investment in the RenCen has turned a once-bleak area into a thriving metropolitan wonderland.

What viewers didn’t know is that the entire story was a [video news release](#) (VNR) funded by General Motors and produced by [Medialink Worldwide](#). WILX-10 took the entire two-and-a-half minute VNR and dropped it into their newscast, keeping the narrative audio of Medialink publicist [Kate Brookes](#). The only work WILX performed on the VNR—beyond pressing the “play” button—was to replace the on-screen titles with station-branded graphics, advancing the illusion that this was a genuine homegrown news report.

At no point did anchor [David Andrews](#) or anyone else at WILX-10 disclose the story’s true source or sponsor to viewers.

Since January, the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD) has observed WILX-10 airing another [complete and uncut VNR from Medialink](#), a story about National Pancake Week from [General Mills](#) and Bisquick.

The station's motto is "Coverage You Can Count On."

Additionally, CMD has monitored two other VNRs from General Motors, one about [Internet car shopping](#) and one about [auto technicians](#).

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[WILX-10, NBC](#)

Lansing, Michigan

Gray Communications

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## “Accidental Housewife” Intentionally Hides Her Sponsor Ties

### Homemaking expert just happens to love all her clients’ products



In the many weeks leading up to Christmas, the TV newscasts are filled with stories about the best holiday gifts to buy your loved ones. Virtually all of these pieces include some kind of advice from an authoritative consumer expert.

Sadly, some of the stories—as well as some of the experts—are secretly bought and paid for by major corporations. One such expert is [Julie Edelman](#).

Calling herself “[The Accidental Housewife](#),” Edelman appears on local and national news programs as a lifestyle expert, sharing her “[housewifely wit and wisdom](#).” What she doesn’t share is that since 2001, she’s partnered with [D S Simon Productions](#) to promote various products and services through guest appearances on news programs. In other words, she’s a shill. And her financial ties to the companies she plugs are virtually always hidden from the viewing audience.



Julie Edelman

Case in point: on December 14, 2005, [WCCB-18](#) (Charlotte, NC) aired a live satellite interview with Edelman on the best stocking stuffers to buy this holiday season. From her remote studio, Julie gave a visual demonstration of her personal picks, including the Build-a-Bear Workshop, the Brother electronic labeling device, and the Tide-to-Go portable stain remover (“A must-have!” exclaimed Edelman).

But Edelman’s picks were anything but personal. Her appearance was jointly funded by Build-A-Bear, Brother, Tide-to-Go and two other companies who just happened to make the very products she was heartily recommending.

The SMT also ran live on [KGUN-9](#) (Tucson, AZ). [KYTX-19](#) (Tyler, TX) ran an edited tape version of the SMT nine days after the interview was conducted. At no point during any of these appearances did Edelman or her interviewers reveal her endorsement deal to viewers at home.

The Center for Media and Democracy has observed Edelman playing the objective expert in two video news releases (VNRs): a [Halloween “tips and trends” story](#) funded by Masterfoods and 1-800-Flowers, and a [Christmas shopping feature](#) sponsored by Toshiba, Fisher Price and Scholastic Media.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this SMT as real news:

[KGUN-9, ABC](#)

Tucson, Arizona

Journal Broadcast Group

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[KYTX-19, CBS](#)

Tyler, Texas

Max Media of Montana

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[WCCB-18, FOX](#)

Charlotte, North Carolina

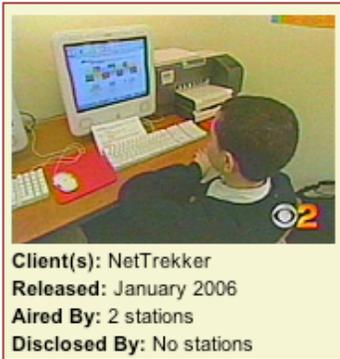
Bahakel Communications

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## Unfiltered Spin from an Internet Porn-Blocker

### L.A. station adapts a promotional news release about child-safe search engine



“Let’s face it,” the [video news release](#) (VNR) begins, “the days of doing homework like this are over.”

The narrator was talking about children doing old-fashioned pen-and-paper research, but she might as well have been referring to [KCBS-2](#). On January 27, 2006, the Los Angeles CBS affiliate aired a brief report on a new search engine that helps kids safely use the web, a crucial tool considering that “the Justice Department says one in four children will have an accidental encounter with Internet porn,” according to the station anchor.

What KCBS-2 didn’t tell its viewers is that the story—and all statistics contained therein—was provided by [NetTrekker](#), the company behind the search engine.

The VNR was created by [Medialink Worldwide](#) and distributed to news stations on January 26. In adopting the story, KCBS-2 removed the voice of the narrating publicist, [Emily Wright](#), and replaced all on-screen identifiers with station-branded graphics.

The newsroom apparently hadn’t done its own research, online or otherwise. If it had, it would have learned that the “one in four children” statistic came from a [1999 telephone survey](#) conducted by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. In the six-and-a-half years since the poll was concluded (a lifetime in Internet terms), nearly every major search engine has developed a free [child-safe version](#) that blocks adult content. Whether it’s better or worse than its competitors, NetTrekker is by far [the most expensive](#), costing users \$10 a month or \$100 a year. The price tag was also left out of the KCBS-2 report.

Another version of the NetTrekker VNR found its way onto [WJBK-2](#), the Fox affiliate in Detroit, Michigan. Like KCBS-2, the newscast used an anchor re-voice and station-branded graphics to

disguise the VNR as their own journalism. But WJBK-2 at least disclosed that NetTrekker was a paid subscription service.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[KCBS-2, CBS](#)

Los Angeles, California

Viacom

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[WJBK-2, FOX](#)

Southfield, Michigan

Fox/News Corporation

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## Culinary Advice Served From a Can

### On two newscasts, a pair of clowning chefs dish out the paid product promotion



On January 26, [WBFF-45](#) in Baltimore aired a live satellite interview with [Lee N. Gerovitz](#) and [Steve Cassarino](#), a clamorous TV chef duo known as [The Clever Cleaver Brothers](#). They were there, purportedly, to discuss how to throw a successful Super Bowl party. But the four-and-a-half minute segment was little more than a showcase for four undisclosed sponsors.

The interview was part of a [satellite media tour](#) (SMT) arranged by [D S Simon Productions](#) and jointly funded by [The Hass Avocado Board](#), [Heinz](#), the [Canned Food Alliance](#), and [Circuit City](#). It's not surprising that Gerovitz and Cassarino's recommendations included guacamole made from Hass-brand avocados ("Over 50 million pounds of Hass avocados will be consumed for the Super Bowl," said Gerovitz), pulled pork sandwiches flavored by Heinz barbeque sauce, and a chili/cheese dip made with quality canned food products.

"It's just as good as fresh food," said Cassarino. "And just as tasty."

The Clever Cleaver Brothers were indeed clever when it came to sticking to the script. When WBFF-45 morning anchor [Harold Fisher](#) asked them for great drink recommendations, Gerovitz—pressed for time with one last sponsor to plug—deftly segued the conversation to plasma-screen TVs from Circuit City.

In pitching the SMT, D S Simon made the client funding information abundantly clear to newsrooms. And yet at no time did WBFF-45 disclose to their audience that the interview was sponsored by Hass, Heinz, Canned Food Alliance and Circuit City.

The "brothers" showed up four days later on [WKBW-7](#) in Buffalo, New York. Again they pushed the same four products from the same four sponsors, and again the endorsement deal was kept hidden from viewers.

D S Simon also distributed a related [video news release](#) (VNR) featuring Gerovitz and Cassarino. It was ignored by all stations.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this SMT as real news:

[WBFF-45, FOX](#)

Baltimore, Maryland  
Sinclair Broadcasting

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[WKBW-7, ABC](#)

Buffalo, New York  
Granite Broadcasting

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## Journalism-on-Loan from Sallie Mae

### The nation's “#1 paying-for-college” company also pays for favorable news coverage



“Paying for your child’s dream college is much easier than people think,” says Tom Joyce, the Vice President of [Sallie Mae](#), Incorporated. The truth of Joyce’s statement went unchallenged in a segment that aired on [WCTI-12](#). But it might have proved a slightly different statement true: paying to get your company in a TV newscast is much easier than people think.

In preparation for the student loan application season, which begins each January, Sallie Mae hired [MultiVu](#) to create a polished two-minute news feature that subtly highlights their company. While the [video news release](#) (VNR) is essentially a “helpful tips” piece about the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), the story features multiple soundbites from Sallie Mae’s Tom Joyce, and refers viewers to [CollegeAnswer.com](#), a Sallie Mae website.

In distributing the VNR to newsrooms, MultiVu found a willing recipient in WCTI-12, the ABC affiliate in Greenville, North Carolina which serves over 230,000 households and whose motto is, ironically, “Coverage You Can Count On.”

Rather than admit to viewers that they were running an externally-produced imitation news story funded by Sallie Mae, the station took steps to adopt the VNR as their own journalistic product. In preparing the feature, WCTI-12 editors swapped the narrative audio track of the MultiVu publicist, [Danielle Addair](#), with that of their own reporter, Cle Pickett, and inserted station-branded text overlays over the MultiVu video.

So on December 21, WCTI-12 morning news anchor [Colleen Maloney](#) introduced the segment as an “Investigation Education” story, and left the rest to Pickett. Tens of thousands of viewers were deceived into thinking they were watching a legitimate news investigation, when all they got was borrowed spin from a private lender.

In addition to the Sallie Mae VNR, WCTI-12 has also been observed airing complete and uncut VNRs

from [DaimlerChrysler](#) and [Panasonic](#), [Namco](#) and [Techno Source](#).

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[WCTI-12, ABC](#)

New Bern, North Carolina

Lamco Communications

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## Valarie D’Elia: Frequent Flying Flack

### NY travel expert stars in corporate VNRs, then smuggles them into her own TV reports



**Client(s):** Sandals Resorts, Viking River Cruises, Air Tahiti Nui  
**Released:** February 2005  
**Aired By:** 1 station  
**Disclosed By:** No stations

[Valarie D’Elia](#) certainly gets around. As a travel commentator, she’s appeared on the Today Show, the Early Show, CNBC, [Fox News](#) and of course the Travel Channel. She’s also a keynote speaker at the New York Times Travel Show and hosts a weekly program on both WOR Radio and the New York One cable network.

But when it comes to vacation advice, D’Elia doesn’t exactly pack her own bags. Her seemingly impartial recommendations are dictated by multi-layered endorsement deals with major travel and leisure companies.

Case in point: in February 2006, [D S Simon Productions](#) released a Valentine-themed [video news release](#) (VNR) on the best romantic getaways. The 1-minute 47-second mock news report was jointly-funded by [Sandals Resorts](#), [Viking River Cruises](#), and [Air Tahiti Nui](#). Not surprisingly, the story was little more than a promotional showcase for all three clients. Scattered throughout the VNR was 36 seconds of promotional soundbites from D’Elia.

“If you don’t have enough money for a six-day jaunt,” said D’Elia, “maybe you want to splurge on a two-day getaway.”

The only TV station to pick up the VNR was [NY1](#), the 24-hour cable news network owned by [Time Warner](#). The reporter: Valarie D’Elia. In her weekly “Travel With Val” segment, D’Elia adapted the VNR into a live studio report, replacing the audio narrative of D S Simon publicist Tommy Mann, changing the order of client plugs, and removing her own recorded soundbites. Edited into the feature was online and phone contact information to learn more about Sandals Resorts, Viking River Cruises and Air Tahiti Nui.

At no point during the broadcast did D'Elia or NY1 anchor [Lewis Dodley](#) reveal that the entire story was funded and furnished by the very three companies being profiled, or that D'Elia was a paid participant in the promotional materials of those same companies. One can only assume that D'Elia isn't too concerned about hiding her conflict of interest, since she offers VNR services [on her own website](#).

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[NY1](#)

New York, New York

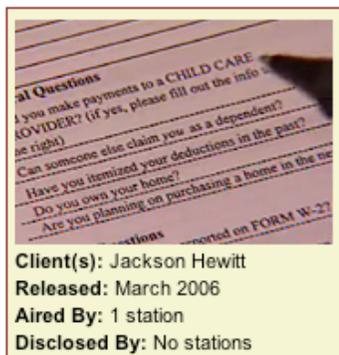
Time Warner

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## Nashville Station Cheats on Tax Report

### Local ABC news story is secretly filed by a national tax preparation franchise



On March 1, 2006, [WKRN-2](#) in Nashville, Tennessee ran a short news feature on the best ways to deduct charitable donations on your income tax report. The segment, which was introduced and read by afternoon anchors Bob Mueller and Anne Holt, featured numerous tax deduction tips and a lengthy soundbite from an accountant.

What viewers didn't know is that the entire story was built from a [video news release](#) (VNR) from [Jackson Hewitt](#), the second-largest tax preparation franchise in the United States. The imitation news story was created by [Medialink Worldwide](#) and reported in voiceover by publicist [Kate Brookes](#). As a subtle promotion, the VNR featured over 30 seconds of soundbites from Jackson Hewitt CEO Mike Lister, and ended with a call for viewers to seek out a “qualified tax preparer.”

Unfortunately for Jackson Hewitt, WKRN-2 trimmed over a minute of content from the original VNR, replacing Brookes' narrative audio with the voice of Anne Holt and removing every mention of Jackson Hewitt. In addition to the loss of promotion, there was a full demotion for Mike Lister. Instead of being identified as the president of his own company, WKRN-2 merely billed him as an “accountant.”



Soundbite speaker Mike Lister, as he appears in the original VNR (left) and the WKRN-2 news feature (right).

While it's nice to see that WKRN-2 stripped the ulterior sales angle out of the corporate news release, they still failed to inform viewers that every piece of their brief report came from Medialink and Jackson Hewitt.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[WKRN-2, ABC](#)

Nashville, Tennessee

Young Broadcasting

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## The Buzz Gets a Rush from Victoria's Secret

Morning show that delivers “news with personality” also delivers VNRs with T&A



Nobody expects [The Daily Buzz](#) to be a paragon of good TV journalism. Since its September 2002 debut, the high-energy, three-hour syndicated morning news program has been committee-tailored to appeal to the younger demographics that advertisers crave. In addition to flashy, fast-paced segments from contributors such as the [Diet Diva](#), the [Fashion Guy](#), the [Lit Chick](#) and [Dr. Jimmy](#), the show culls most of its soft news content from wire services and network feeds.

But on February 22, the Daily Buzz took its lead from another source: [Victoria's Secret](#). Anchor [Kia Malone](#) introduced and narrated a 90-second segment on the company's new Beauty Rush line of candy-flavored lip glosses. The story featured numerous glamour shots and soundbites of scantily-clad Brazilian supermodel Gisele Bundchen, who testified that if you use these products, “I think you're cool.”

In reality, the story was taken from a [video news release](#) (VNR) created by [D S Simon Productions](#) and funded by Victoria's Secret. In adapting the news release, producers re-edited the video to look like a self-produced report, adding new background music, inserting custom-branded text overlays, and replacing the original narration provided by D S Simon with the voice of [Kia Malone](#). At no point did anyone on the show disclose to viewers that the entire feature was paid for and provided by Victoria's Secret, a violation of the [Radio-Television News Directors Association's ethical guidelines](#).

The Daily Buzz is co-owned by [ACME Communications](#) and [Emmis Communications](#), and is available weekday mornings on [139 stations](#) nationwide.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[Daily Buzz](#)

Lake Mary, Florida

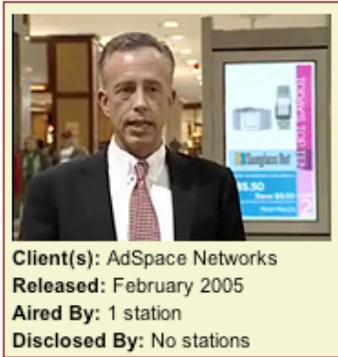
Acme Communications

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## Pay No Attention to the Man Behind the SmartScreen™

### CBS station runs fake report on high-tech mall displays, no questions asked



“Browsing for the best deals is a lot easier now, thanks to the latest in smart shopping technology.”

So said [WRDW-12](#) reporter [Meredith Taylor](#), during the station’s February 10 broadcast. In the 10:00 PM newshour, the CBS affiliate in North Augusta, SC, ran a nearly two-minute feature on the SmartScreen, a 60-inch networked plasma video display that gives mall shoppers information about the latest sales and bargains. Taylor’s feature included positive soundbites from two consumers, two mall retailers, and the president of [AdSpace Networks](#), the company behind the SmartScreen.

What viewers couldn’t possibly know is that Taylor never came within 100 miles of anyone featured in the story. The entire report was covertly lifted from a [video news release](#) (VNR) created by [D S Simon Productions](#) and funded by AdSpace Networks.

In adapting the story, WRDW-12 made only minimal cuts to the original VNR. To help disguise the news release as their own journalistic product, the station inserted custom-branded text overlays and enlisted Taylor to replace the voiceover provided by D S Simon’s Sonia Martin. Despite the re-voicing effort, Taylor’s narrative matched the original VNR script nearly word-for-word.

It’s not known whether the statistical figures cited in the VNR were independently verified before being used in the newscast. At no point did Taylor or WRDW-12 anchor [Tom Campbell](#) disclose to viewers that the story was commissioned and funded by AdSpace Networks.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[WRDW-12, CBS](#)

North Augusta, South Carolina

Gray Communications

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## No Accounting for Ethics

### Southern ABC station runs a rock & roll news story planted by CPAs



When you think of rock music and video games, you probably don't think of the [American Institute of Certified Practicing Accountants](#) (AICPA). But in 2005, the professional trade group was looking to change all that, with a little help from an unscrupulous TV station.

Last year, the AICPA launched [The Turnaround Game](#), a free web-based simulation program that allows users to run the financial end of a fictional record label. The game is part of a [larger promotional effort](#) designed to put a hip and modern spin on the accounting profession, and to interest more high school and college students in a career as a Certified Public Accountant.

As part of the promotion, the AICPA hired [D S Simon Productions](#) to create a [video news release](#) (VNR) about The Turnaround Game. The two-minute segment, narrated by D S Simon publicist Will Harris, includes praising testimony from two students who played the game, as well as two professors who deem the simulation to be educational as well as fun. The VNR was announced and distributed to TV newsrooms on December 13.

Sadly for the AICPA, only [WTVM-9](#)—a small ABC affiliate in Columbus, Georgia—decided to pick up the story. But what the station lacked in quantity, it made up for in lack-of-quality. WTVM-9 ran the VNR without a single editorial change. Evening anchor [Kari Tornabene](#) introduced the feature and its fake reporter (who she called “Bill” Harris) as if they both belonged to the station.

Not once did WTVM-9 tell its viewers that the entire story was provided by a public relations firm, or that it was funded by an industry trade group which would benefit from the coverage.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[WTVM-9, ABC](#)

Columbus, Georgia

Raycom Media

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## A Fresh-Cut Front For the Flower Flacks

### Planted Valentine's Day report secretly stems from rose peddlers



**Client(s):** Flower Promotion Organization  
**Released:** February 2006  
**Aired By:** 5 stations  
**Disclosed By:** No stations

In 1999, the [Flower Promotion Organization](#) (FPO) was created to end a 30-year trade war between U.S. and Colombian flower growers. Since then, with the help of major PR firms like [Porter Novelli](#), the bi-national industry alliance has embarked on a [strategic multi-million dollar campaign](#) to raise consumer demand for cut flowers.

Naturally, there's no better time for the FPO to push their buds than Valentine's Day. So on February 13, a [video news release](#) (VNR) created by [Medialink Worldwide](#) and funded by the FPO was distributed to TV stations across the country. The two-minute fake news feature centered around the floral care advice of Dr. [Bridget Behe](#), a professor of horticulture at Michigan State University. In addition to gorgeous shots of roses in full bloom, the VNR directs viewers to Behe's [Flower MD](#) website and a toll-free hotline, both sponsored by the FPO.

Over the next 36 hours, the VNR was blended into the afternoon newscasts of five different stations: [KLST-8](#) (San Angelo, TX), [WCPO-9](#) (Cincinnati, OH), [WGCL-46](#) (Atlanta, GA), [WHNT-19](#) (Huntsville, AL), and [WHP-21](#) (Harrisburg, PA). Each newsroom performed significant editing on the original video package, trimming the story down to one minute or less and re-organizing the order of certain shots and soundbites. All five stations actively disguised the VNR as their own news product by inserting station-branded text overlays and replacing the narrative audio of the Medialink publicist with the voice of their own reporter. None of the newscasts cited Medialink or the Flower Promotion Organization as the source of their story.

Previously, WCPO-9 had deceptively incorporated a [prescription skin cream VNR](#) into its broadcast, while WHP-21 had participated in a live [satellite media tour](#) without disclosing [Subway as the funding source](#).

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[KLST-8, CBS](#)

San Angelo, Texas  
Nexstar Broadcasting

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[WCPO-9, ABC](#)

Cincinnati, Ohio  
E.W. Scripps Company

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[WGCL-46, CBS](#)

Atlanta, Georgia  
Meredith Corporation

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[WHNT-19, CBS](#)

Huntsville, Alabama  
New York Times

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[WHP-21, CBS](#)

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania  
Clear Channel

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## Inorganic Chemistry at KOKH

### Sinclair Fox station has an unhealthy relationship with fake news



Client(s): Chemistry.com

Released: February 2006

Aired By: 1 station

Disclosed By: No stations

“With Valentine’s Day around the corner, love is on the minds of many,” said [KOKH-25](#) anchor [Kris Roberts](#), as he introduced the next story. What viewers didn’t know is that every word in his teleprompter was provided by publicists, and the report that followed was nothing more than a pre-packaged stealth ad for an online dating service.

To herald its new [Chemistry.com](#) spinoff site, [Match.com](#) hired [D S Simon Productions](#) to create a [video news release](#) (VNR) about “the chemistry of love.” The 102-second video package included soundbites from Tim Demik and Diane Millaway, two habitual online daters; Kristin Kelly, a spokeswoman for Chemistry.com; and Dr. Helen Fisher, an author and anthropologist who has studied the science of love and attraction for 25 years. The second half of the VNR provided a visual demonstration of Chemistry.com’s “patented 1-2-3-Meet system,” which is described as relying more on chemical instinct than traditional dating criteria.

Once again, KOKH-25 actively deceived their audience by taking the complete and uncut VNR and working it into their newscast without a single trace of disclosure. Editors inserted network-branded graphic overlays onto the video and Roberts introduced narrating publicist Jim Lawrence as if he were a station reporter.

In the course of its ten-month study, the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD) documented KOKH-25 airing six VNRs—a staggeringly high number, given that CMD documented TV newsrooms’ use of 36 VNRs (thousands are produced each year). In addition to Chemistry.com, KOKH-25 aired complete pre-packaged VNRs from [Trend Micro Software](#), [Panasonic](#), [Intel](#), [Cadillac](#), and [Towers Perrin](#).

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[KOKH-25, FOX](#)

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Sinclair Broadcasting

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage

## A Ruse By Any Other Name...

### NBC station tries to turn a brand-name VNR into a generic news report



On January 30, 2006, [WVVA-6](#), the NBC affiliate in Bluefield, West Virginia, blended a two-minute Zicam [video news release](#) (VNR) into their 5PM newscast, but removed nearly every reference to Zicam itself. The result is a straightforward health segment about flu-related dehydration that, despite all the station's editing, is still fake news.

On behalf of [Matrixx Initiatives](#), makers of the Zicam cold/flu remedies, [D S Simon Productions](#) created a two-minute VNR about the average American's failure to prepare for flu season, leading to increased chances for sickness and dehydration. The imitation news report featured several figures from a self-sponsored flu survey, as well as numerous bits of health advice from a telegenic family doctor. It's only in the last thirty seconds that the VNR shows its true advertising roots and becomes an ode to Zicam's merits.

Since broadcast PR firms offer "full and unrestricted use" of their VNRs, TV stations are free to use the material however they see fit. In adopting this VNR, WVVA-6 health reporter [Eva Pilgrim](#) and her cohorts chose to lop off the promotional tail end of the video package, as well as most product shots of Zicam cold remedies. Pilgrim modified the script and re-voiced the narrative provided by D S Simon publicist Sonia Martin, closing the piece with a few independently-gathered facts from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

While Pilgrim and her colleagues tried hard not to do the work of Matrixx Initiatives that night, they didn't do their own work either. The entire health story was still built from a corporate-funded news package that revolved around a questionable medical survey and still contained a few references to Zicam. And WVVA-6 viewers believed they were watching genuine journalism.

CMD caught the following TV station(s) passing off this VNR as real news:

[WVVA-6, NBC](#)

Bluefield, West Virginia

Quincy Newspapers

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Click on a station link for their contact information, plus details of their VNR and/or SMT usage