

# Pincén on the Skating Rink

## Notes on Native Advertising in a Nineteenth-Century Journal

Von: Candela Marini

“Advertisements! Advertisements!

Today’s Tribune has over ONE HUNDRED new ads. Long live advertising!”<sup>1</sup>

– *La Tribuna*, January 11, 1865

“*El Porteño* has confessed that the advertisements invade it in such a way that it is forced every day to suppress editorials [...]. Indeed with the section of advertisements that invades every time in the material part of the newspaper and the prayers and gifts to its owner on the other hand, little remains for the subscriber who has signed up to read something. But confessing it seems to me rather imprudent.

Be careful, colleague!

With this invasion, you will end up competing with Forlet’s *Avisador*, which contains nothing but ads.”

– *El Mosquito*, January 12, 1879

A careless click on YouTube can take us to a documentary on the invention of sliced bread only to realize it’s a twenty-minute advertisement for artisanal bread. The online world is plagued with sponsored content, mingled in your search results, camouflaged with your friends’ posts, or appearing as suggested pages. Given the nature of production and consumption on the internet – where anyone and everyone is a content creator – this landscape of words and images of dubious origins and intentions is not surprising (it is indeed a perfect hotbed for fake news).

Paid content is particularly problematic in news media, where the shift to virtual space has exacerbated the decline in sales and regular advertising revenue, forcing news outlets to rely more and more on alternative forms of income, accepting dubious forms of sponsored content. The blurry ways in which paid content can slide into the reading experience of – in this case – news have been grouped under the umbrella term of native advertising: “a form

of paid content marketing, where the commercial content is delivered adopting the form and function of editorial content with the attempt to recreate the user experience of reading news instead of advertising content.”<sup>2</sup> Without feeling intrusive or altering the overall look of the media being consumed, ads are seamlessly integrated into the delivery of information that is posed to be independent and neutral, consonant with the public service ideal of the fourth estate. It is easy to see why this trend is alarming: readers may not even realize they are consuming paid content and commercial pressures may also translate into a diminished sense of journalistic autonomy, with sponsors limiting the coverage or angle of certain stories. The line separating editorial content and advertising has been deemed so crucial to the constitution of our modern democracies that it has been historically referred to as the separation of church and state. In recent years, however, this discourse has begun to shift, with many legacy news media openly embracing native advertising. In the words of former Time Inc. CEO, Joe Ripp “[editors] are more excited about it because no longer are we asking ourselves the question are we violating church and state, whatever that was. We are now asking ourselves the question are we violating our trust with our consumers?”<sup>3</sup> Such statements and related scandals<sup>4</sup> have sparked a wave of outrage and are a regular source of concern in the analysis of today’s journalism.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, native advertising isn’t new. Advertorials, product placements, sponsored content, and other forms of native advertising have been around since the very beginning of the professionalization of the press. Today’s problem has its own specific issues (data collection and targeted advertising are undeniably modern weapons of mass distraction), but the relationship between the press and commercial interests seems to be much more intertwined than we want to admit.

Let me begin with an embarrassing confession. Many years ago, during my early archival research, I was flipping through the pages of the Argentine satirical journal *El Mosquito* (1863–1893)<sup>6</sup> and came across a curious image of Vicente Cathunau Pincén. The Puelche leader had recently been taken prisoner by the Argentine government and the journal showed him partaking in carnival celebrations at the Skating Rink: “The great novelty of the 1879 carnival is the magnificent Skating-Rink Hall. They say that since he has visited it, Pincén has no more memory of the desert or his twelve women” (fig. 1). I was quite confused by the image: Pincén had spent two decades resisting the Argentine military’s encroachment on indigenous lands, and now that he had been captured, he was wandering around entertainment venues in Buenos Aires? The illustration didn’t make much sense to me – but I didn’t spend much time thinking about it either. Years later, when I returned to the print world of the 1860s and 1870s, the tricks and games I kept stumbling upon as a reader reawakened the memory of this illustration and made me finally understand it for what it was: a covert advertisement for the Skating Rink.

Why hadn’t I seen it before? I simply wasn’t expecting it.



Fig. 1: El Mosquito, January 19, 1879. Double page. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno.

To be fair, the military aggressions of Julio Argentino Roca – then the new Minister of War – against the Indigenous populations of the southern Pampa and northern Patagonia regions were a regular topic of satirical commentary in *El Mosquito*. The weekly’s editorials were overtly racist, but the focus tended to be on Roca; its illustrations, however, left some room for ambiguity and even questioning of the violence. On December 8, 1878, *El Mosquito* published an illustration showing Roca dragging a group of unidentified “Indians” with a rope: “Triumphal walk on Florida Street of a presidential candidate with Indians taken prisoner by... others than him.”<sup>7</sup>

Fig. 2: El Mosquito, December 8, 1878. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno.

On December 29, 1878, *El Mosquito* included a remembrance of Adolfo Alsina, previous minister of war who had died a year before, on December 29, 1877. The illustration shows an Indigenous prisoner in shackles kneeling on all fours in front of a bust of Alsina, having apparently placed a wreath. Next to him stands an allegory of history and General Roca, who also carries flowers and a wreath. History says: “General Roca, you must never forget that this illustrious citizen was the initiator of the conquest of the desert and that he paid for it with his life.”<sup>8</sup>

Fig. 3: El Mosquito, December 29, 1878. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno.

If at first glance the cartoon appears to be quite straightforward, deflating Roca's ego yet again, a second look reveals a more ambiguous and even denunciatory message. It is not clear who the figure of History is pointing at: is it Alsina or the Indigenous figure at their feet? History is looking at Roca, while her hands are pointing in two different directions. Roca is looking down, perhaps at the Indigenous figure. And what "Conquest of the Desert" is she referring to? Was it the military extermination campaign with which Roca would become president? The one presented as the culmination of a project with many precursors, but whose undoubted beginning was in 1492? Or is she referring to the original inhabitants of the lands on which they stand? More importantly, who actually gave their lives? In her admonition to remember, History also points to the dangers of institutionalized memory: Alsina already enjoys a bust that will help to immortalize his name, while there is neither a monument nor a tomb for the unknown Indigenous figure, hunched over, unable to reach the upper half of the composition. For the latter, History's exhortation to remember is more of a cry for justice.

This illustration is a good example of *El Mosquito's* visual commentary practices, which demanded a well-informed and equally playful reader. Images gradually took over this four-page publication: at the beginning only one page was dedicated to illustrations, later the two inside pages were almost entirely visual, and by the end of its publication life, three quarters

of its content consisted of images. The fact that illustrations were not primarily placed on the cover, but were given full prominence inside, shows that images were not merely an alluring element to attract more subscribers (as was the case with other contemporary publications), but an integral part of their communication scheme. The cartoonist responsible for these illustrations was also the new director and owner of the journal: Enrique Stein – a.k.a. Henri Stein. The French caricaturist joined the journal in 1868, becoming its editorial director in 1872 and owner three years later. Stein is credited with transforming the cartoon scene in Buenos Aires, successfully running *El Mosquito* until 1893. As later issues would announce, the journal became a “fame machine”. In full expression of the adage “there is no such thing as bad publicity”, being a laughingstock in the pages of *El Mosquito* was a sign of relevance in the Argentine political and social scene.<sup>9</sup> Exploiting the journal’s popularity and the seductive power of images, Stein was quick to lend his pencil to interested announcers. If we look back at figure 3, the right side is taken over by two columns offering “advice for Christmas shoppers.” With Stein’s unmistakable style, the owners of local shops pose with their merchandise ready to tempt the consuming eyes of readers: “In the rich jewellery Artigue (Peru 36) you will find jewellery of the best taste,” “When it comes to chocolates, boxes, pastries, who can beat the Confitería del Águila?,” “And don’t you think that a case of good assorted liqueurs is nice if they come from M. Berthe’s liquor store?” Most of these announcers and some of the details included in the advertisement (such as the heavy medal worn by the jeweller Artigue), reappeared in *El Mosquito* two issues later (January 5, 1879). This time, however, they were integrated into the journal’s editorial content, as part of their regular “Pecking” section. The excuse for talking about these merchants and their products was none other than to thank them for gifts they had sent to the publication’s offices.

With the same illustrator in charge of both the satirical and the advertising visual content, it is not surprising that his pencil began to blend content more aggressively, resulting in the elimination of separate spaces (fig. 4). The inspection of previous issues shows this is not the first time that the satirical cartoonist became an artist at the service of their regular advertisers. Sharing the same space and appearance as the illustrations that subscribers paid to read, these visual advertisements attracted readers. Their commercial nature, however, became clear when they read the text that accompanied the images.

What was true in the visual spaces was echoed in the written sections of the journal. In fact, product placement outside the advertising section had become quite common. If the example of the list of merchants *El Mosquito* comments on is straightforward, there were other instances where the commercial nature of the text was not as evident. The opening of the Skating Rink Hall is a good example.

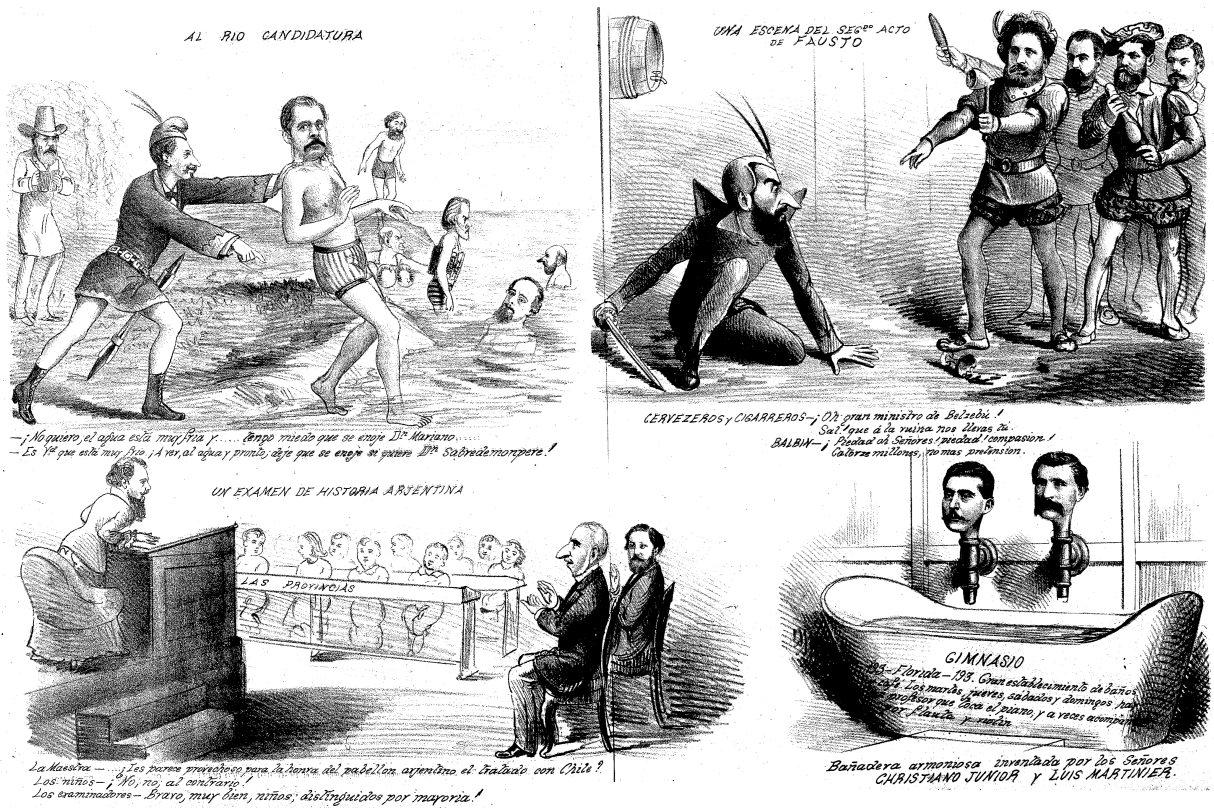


Fig. 4: El Mosquito, January 12, 1879. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. The illustration on the bottom right corner is an advertisement for the bathhouse opened by Christiano Junior and Luis Martinier, whose portraits are included as the heads of the faucets.

The Skating Rink was one of the many celebrated new establishments in a city excitedly witnessing the expansion of its cultural scene. Newspapers would comment on the offerings of theatres and entertainment halls, encouraging the public to attend and support their projects. For this reason, readers would not have found it forced or out of place to read about it in *El Mosquito* as well. The December 8, 1878 issue includes an advertorial commenting on the opening of the Skating Rink in the middle of the summer. The text preserves its sardonic tone and is ambivalent in its judgment of the soon-to-open establishment, but this is of little importance, since the relatively long commentary would undoubtedly put the Rink on the radar of the journal's readers.





- January 12, 1879: First comment that puts Pincén in conversation with the cultural scene: “Music sweetens and tenderizes even fractious and wild characters. Pincén wept loudly when he heard the prayer played on the 6th line, Cañumil and Catriel smiled pleasantly when maestro Pancho played the *Fille de Mme. Angot*.”
- January 19, 1879: Illustration of Pincén in the Skating Rink Hall (fig. 1).

Given his sustained presence in the weekly’s pages, Pincén’s visual appearance in the January 19 issue played well within the horizon of expectations of *El Mosquito*’s readership. More than that, they used Pincén both as bait (capitalizing on the hot topic of his capture) and as a smokescreen to masquerade advertising as news.<sup>11</sup> In the written world, newspapers had long used hot topics in the news as reading bait for advertising. During the war against Paraguay (1864–1870), for instance, it was a common marketing strategy to use a catchy headline related to the news of the day to advertise something completely unrelated. Thus, under the heading “Capture of Curupayti” we learn that a fonda and billiard café are for sale (*La Tribuna*, September 16, 1866), while the services of a twenty-five-year-old Uruguayan man are offered under the heading “Paraguayans in defeat” (*La Tribuna*, July 6, 1866).

With the inclusion of Pincén having fun at the Skating Rink, the weekly is also employing its satirical tools and rules in the service of advertising. Indeed, *El Mosquito* weaponizes the hyperbole characteristic of satirical journals – exaggeration that is only accepted in the satirical context, given that the role of the caricature is precisely to emphasize something about an event, public figure, etc., usually with some kind of value judgment. *El Mosquito* uses this same narrative form for its advertisement, creating the formula that will make it as effective as contemporary forms of native advertising: the incorporation of similar content (the pieces of news and people dominating the public sphere), the same aesthetic and presentation (same illustrator), and the same narrative technique (playing with hyperbole, typical in this publication). The hyperbole using Pincén worked on its own (a figure representative of the “barbaric desert” enthusiastically embracing city life and its pleasures, forgetting the families and the lands for which he fought for decades), but its effectiveness was intensified by the use of a topic of extraordinary popularity and relevance at the time (his recent capture). Hiding native advertising under the hot news of the day was a successful formula that allowed *El Mosquito* to sidestep the criticism the journal itself had leveled at *El Porteño* (opening quote).

The second half of the nineteenth century was a period of revolutionary transformations for media and communication technologies. In cities like Buenos Aires, the excitement associated with the expansion of the press is hard to miss when reading its most thriving newspapers. Access to news from different regions of the world, the commercial viability of editorial projects, the expanded readership, or the ability to subscribe to journals published in Santiago, New York, or Paris – these were all celebrated as markers of a modernized society, advocates of republican values, and part of the larger international community of progress and civilization.<sup>12</sup> But behind this promising press expansion there were two

fundamental variables: subscriptions and advertisements (the latter usually boosted by the former).<sup>13</sup> This explains *La Tribuna*'s announcement quoted at the beginning of this essay: the proliferation of ads on the newspaper's pages is not only cherished but advanced as the new king and patron of journalism. *Long live advertising!*

The second quote, from the sardonic *El Mosquito*, shows that the balance between advertising and editorial content was already a problem. In this case, the deception does not really lie in the masking of advertisements but in the outright suppression of editorial content. If the trends continue, *El Mosquito* seems to tease, subscribers will soon be paying to read nothing but advertisements. With its usual playful twists, the weekly suggests that the problem lies in being transparent about it – better just make it business as usual. Of course, the joke is also on *El Mosquito*, which not only placed ads in areas where readers expected editorial content, but also disguised them as commentary on the news of the day. The satirical journal, whose main goal was to expose the shortcomings and abuses of the government and society it addressed, unapologetically adopted all forms of advertising. Were its readers tricked? Was the journal constricted in its content and laughing targets? Or were expectations and reading practices simply different?

This brief exploration of a nineteenth-century journal can help us reconsider the idea that the expansion of the press and the public sphere it helped to construct developed independently of commercial interests. The consumption of news went hand in hand with the marketing of commercial products. In other words, consumerism was intertwined with press expansion and news reporting.<sup>14</sup> Today's intense adoption of native advertising may or may not signal "the appearance of a new model of openly commercial journalistic ventures",<sup>15</sup> but the idea that the rise of native advertising flags the end of the separation of church and state assumes that native advertising is new and that such separation has been the norm throughout the history of modern news media. In fact, in the development of print capitalism, the relationship between the press and advertising has been more entangled than the image of opposition that journalism and our democratic ideals have fostered. Political and commercial independence have been the exception rather than the rule. Revising this history will help us reimagine the complex place of the news media and understand that we may not have yet enjoyed the ideal we think we had in the past.

## References

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1. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.
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4. E.g., Gillmor, Dan (2013): The lessons of the Atlantic's Scientology 'sponsor content' blunder, in: The Guardian  
[\[https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jan/16/atlantic-scientology-sponsor-content-blunder\]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jan/16/atlantic-scientology-sponsor-content-blunder) 16/01/2013 (Last Accessed 23.04.2024).
5. For instance, the popular show Last Week Tonight with John Oliver has dedicated a number of stories to this issue. See LastWeekTonight (2014): Native Advertising: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO), on: YouTube  
[\[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E\\_F5GxCwizc\]](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_F5GxCwizc) 04/08/2014 (Last Accessed 24.05.2024).
6. For a complete study of *El Mosquito* and its significance, see Román, Claudia (2017): *Prensa, política y cultura visual. El Mosquito (Buenos Aires, 1863—1893)*, Buenos Aires: Ampersand).
7. “Paseo triunfal en la calle Florida de un candidato a la presidencia con indios hechos prisioneros por... otros que él.”
8. “General Roca, Ud. no debe nunca olvidar que este ilustre ciudadano fue el iniciador de la conquista del desierto y que la pagó con su vida.”
9. Román, Claudia (2017): *Prensa, política y cultura visual. El Mosquito (Buenos Aires, 1863—1893)*, Buenos Aires: Ampersand.
10. See Gunthert, André (2015): *L'image partagée : la photographie numérique*, Paris: Textuel.
11. The strategy of using Pincén for the Skating Rink preannounces Buffalo Bill's famous ads for his Wild West Show using the image of Sitting Bull in its posters.
12. “Además de protagonista en la vida política de la historia del siglo XIX, la prensa también se convirtió en una de las principales varas con las que midió el grado de libertad de un gobierno y el nivel de ‘civilización’ de una sociedad.” Alonso, Paula (ed.) (2004): *Construcciones Impresas. Panfletos, diarios y revistas en la formación de los estados nacionales en América Latina, 1820–1920*, Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, p. 8.
13. This is very clear for *El Mosquito*. As soon as the publication expanded its subscription points to other Argentine cities (Córdoba, Mendoza) and Uruguay (Montevideo), they published an “announcement for merchants” informing them of the good standing of the journal and their consequent acceptance of ads on their pages (December 5, 1863). See Román, Claudia (2017): *Prensa, política y cultura visual. El Mosquito (Buenos Aires, 1863—1893)*, Buenos Aires: Ampersand, p. 38.

14. It is beyond the scope of this entry, but even the professionalization of literature and its increased independence from political patrons or private fortune went hand in hand with a flirtatious association with the commercial world. Not only were novels published as feuilletons, a serialized format that influenced the content and style of a story designed to grab the reader's attention and hook them for future installments, but some of them became advertising spaces themselves, allowing for product placement and preaching the education of the consumer. The most famous example in this context is Juana Manuela Gorriti's *Oasis en la vida* [Oasis in Life], published in 1888 by the South American Company of Bank Bills. It is the love story of a young, hard-working couple whose happy ending is made possible by an unexpected fortune brought in by an insurance policy of the groom's deceased father. This insurance company is none other than *La Buenos Aires*, which commissioned the novel and to which the latter is dedicated. Embedded marketing for two patisseries in the city can also be found in the novel. Just in case the training in the goodness of insurance companies and other forms of financial behavior is not clear enough, the book offers an introduction entitled „Political Economy“.
15. Ferrer Conill, Raul (op.cit.), p. 9.

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