



Highlights of [GAO-05-643T](#), a report to Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

Why GAO Did This Study

In recent years, federal agencies have been increasing their use of video news releases (VNRs), which frequently include prepackaged news stories. While the use of VNRs is widespread and widely known by those in the media industry, the quality and content of materials considered to constitute a VNR can vary greatly. Generally, a VNR package may contain several items, including a series of video clips, known as B-roll footage; title cards containing relevant information, known as slates; a prepackaged news story, referred to as a story package; and other promotional materials. These materials are produced in the same manner as television news organizations produce materials for their own news segments.

The prepackaged news stories are distributed to local television news stations and are designed to resemble actual news stories. By eliminating the costs and effort of producing an original news story, agencies can find news stations willing to broadcast a favorable news segment on a desired topic.

GAO examined prepackaged news stories produced by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Office of National Drug Control Policy and evaluated whether these materials constituted covert propaganda in violation of the prohibition on using appropriated funds for publicity and propaganda not authorized by Congress.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-643T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Jeffrey McDermott at (202) 512-2584 or mcdermottj@gao.gov.

VIDEO NEWS RELEASES

Unattributed Prepackaged News Stories Violate Publicity and Propaganda Prohibition

What GAO Found

Prepackaged news stories are complete, audio-video presentations that may be included in video news releases, or VNRs. They are intended to be indistinguishable from news segments broadcast to the public by independent television news organizations. To help accomplish this goal, these stories include actors or others hired to portray “reporters” and may be accompanied by suggested scripts that television news anchors can use to introduce the story during the broadcast. These practices allow prepackaged news stories to be broadcast, without alteration, as television news.

The publicity or propaganda prohibition states, “No part of any appropriation contained in this or any other Act shall be used for publicity or propaganda purposes within the United States not heretofore authorized by the Congress.” GAO has long interpreted this provision to prohibit agencies from, among other things, producing materials that are covert as to origin. Our opinions have emphasized that the critical element of covert propaganda is concealment of the government’s role in producing the materials. Agencies have violated this law when they used appropriated funds to produce articles and op-ed pieces that were the ostensible position of persons not associated with the government.

In two legal opinions this past year, federal agencies commissioned and distributed prepackaged news stories and introductory scripts about their activities that were designed to be indistinguishable from news stories produced by private news broadcasters. In neither case did the agency include any statement or other indication in its news stories that disclosed to the television viewing audience, the target audience of the purported news stories, that the agency wrote and produced those news stories. In other words, television-viewing audiences did not know that stories they watched on television news programs *about the government* were, in fact, prepared *by the government*. GAO concluded that those prepackaged news stories violated the publicity or propaganda prohibition.

While agencies generally have the right to disseminate information about their policies and activities, agencies may not use appropriated funds to produce or distribute prepackaged news stories intended to be viewed by television audiences that conceal or do not clearly identify for the television viewing audience that the agency was the source of those materials. It is not enough that the contents of an agency’s communication may be unobjectionable. Neither is it enough for an agency to identify itself to the broadcasting organization as the source of the prepackaged news story.

In addition to these opinions, the Comptroller General issued a circular letter to the heads of all cabinet departments and federal agencies in February to alert them to our opinions on VNRs and to remind them of their duty to disclose the source of materials that they disseminate to the public.