

DauidsGuides.com - Book Summary

Book Author: Ryan Holiday

Book Title: Trust Me, I'm Lying

[Amazon Link](#)

Summary:

Preface

- And pretty much all of that happened...from day one.
 - I whipped up early media interest by leaking rumors that the book was a celebrity tell-all.
 - I made tongues wag by encouraging gossip about the size of the advance I received from the publisher.
 - I knew I could get bloggers to denounce this book and that the conflict between us would generate publicity. They did and that happened.
 - I crafted one of the most watched book trailers of the year.
 - I created stunts that would give the book a news angle that the media would salivate over.
 - I knew I could make this book a bestseller. It became one.
- I applied all nine tactics of media manipulation in order to propagate my warnings about the dangers and prevalence of media manipulation.

Introduction

- What was I doing here? I was there to deface billboards, specifically billboards I had designed and paid for. Not that I'd expected to do anything like this, but there I was, doing it. My girlfriend, coaxed into being my accomplice, was behind the wheel of the getaway car.
- As soon as I got home I dashed off two e-mails to two major blogs. Under the fake name Evan Meyer I wrote, "I saw these on my way home last night. It was on 3rd and Crescent Heights, I think. Good to know Los Angeles hates Tucker Max too," and attached the photos.
- But it illustrates a part of the media system that is hidden from your view: how the news is created and driven by marketers, and that no one does anything to stop it.
- I guess it is safe to admit now that the entire firestorm was, essentially, fake.
- I alerted college LGBT and women's rights groups to screenings in their area and baited them to protest our offensive movie at the theater, knowing that the nightly news would cover it. I started a boycott group on Facebook. I orchestrated fake tweets and posted fake comments to articles online. I even won a contest for being the first one to send in a picture of a defaced ad in Chicago (thanks for the free T-shirt, Chicago *RedEye*. Oh,

also, that photo was from New York). I manufactured preposterous stories about Tucker's behavior on and off the movie set and reported them to gossip websites, which gleefully repeated them. I paid for anti-woman ads on feminist websites and anti-religion ads on Christian websites, knowing each would write about it. Sometimes I just Photoshopped ads onto screenshots of websites and got coverage for controversial ads that never actually ran. The loop became final when, for the first time in history, I put out a press release to answer my own manufactured criticism: TUCKER MAX RESPONDS TO CTA DECISION: "BLOWME," the headline read.

- *Hello, shitstorm of press. Hello, number one on the New York Times bestseller list.*
- So as the manufactured storm I created played itself out in the press, real people started believing it, and it became true.
- Someone pays me, I manufacture a story for them, and we trade it up the chain—from a tiny blog to *Gawker* to a website of a local news network to the *Huffington Post* to the major newspapers to cable news and back again, until the unreal becomes real.* Sometimes I start by planting a story. Sometimes I put out a press release or ask a friend to break a story on their blog. Sometimes I "leak" a document. Sometimes I fabricate a document and leak that. Really, it can be anything, from vandalizing a Wikipedia page to producing an expensive viral video. However the play starts, the end is the same: The economics of the Internet are exploited to change public perception—and sell product.
- The con is to build a brand off the backs of others. Your attention and your credulity are what's stolen.

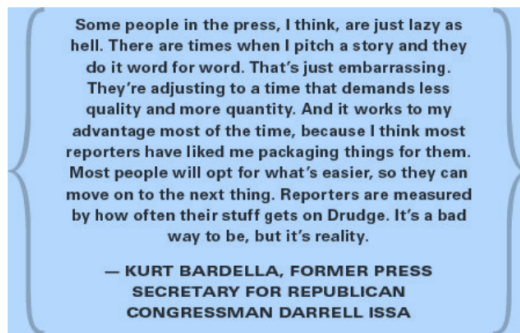
Chapter 1 - Blogs Make the News

- It is not the news that sells papers, but papers that sell news. - Will Bonner, *Mobs, Messiahs, and Markets*
- One early media critic put it this way: We're a country governed by public opinion, and public opinion is largely governed by the press, so isn't it critical to understand what governs the press? What rules over the media, he concluded, rules over the country. In this case, what rules over *Politico* literally almost ruled over everyone.
- To understand what makes blogs act—why *Politico* followed Pawlenty around—is the key to making them do what you want. Learn their rules, change the game. That's all it takes to control public opinion.
- In case you didn't catch it, here's the cycle again:
 - Political blogs need things to cover; traffic increases during election Reality (election far away) does not align with this
 - Political blogs create candidates early; move up start of election cycle
 - The person they cover, by nature of coverage, becomes actual candidate (or president)
 - Blogs profit (literally), the public loses
- The economics of the Internet created a twisted set of incentives that make traffic more important—and more profitable—than the truth. With the mass media—and today, mass

culture—relying on the web for the next big thing, it is a set of incentives with massive implications.

- Blogs need traffic, being first drives traffic, and so entire stories are created out of whole cloth to make that happen. This is just one facet of the economics of blogging, but it's a critical one. When we understand the logic that drives these business choices, those choices become predictable. And what is predictable can be anticipated, redirected, accelerated, or controlled—however you or I choose.

Chapter 2 - How to Turn Nothing Into Something in Three Way-Too-Easy Steps



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- IN THE INTRODUCTION I EXPLAINED A SCAM I CALL “trading up the chain.” It’s a strategy I developed that manipulates the media through recursion. I can turn nothing into something by placing a story with a small blog that has very low standards, which then becomes the source for a story by a larger blog, and that, in turn, for a story by larger media outlets. I create, to use the words of one media scholar, a “self-reinforcing news wave.” People like me do this everyday.
- Not a video of the charity’s best work, or even its most important work, but the work that exaggerated certain elements aimed at helping the video spread. (In this case, two or three examples in exotic locations that actually had the least amount of community benefit.) Next, he wrote a short article for a small local blog in Brooklyn and embedded the video. This site was chosen because its stories were often used or picked up by the New York section of the *Huffington Post*. As expected, the *Huffington Post* did bite, and ultimately featured the story as local news in both New York City and Los Angeles. Following my advice, he sent an e-mail from a fake address with these links to a reporter at CBS in Los Angeles, who then did a television piece on it—using mostly clips from my friend’s heavily edited video. In anticipation of all of this he’d been active on a channel of the social news site Reddit (where users vote on stories and topics they like) during the weeks leading up to his campaign launch in order to build up some connections on the site.
- It made the front page almost immediately. This score on Reddit (now bolstered by other press as well) put the story on the radar of what I call the major “cool stuff” blogs—sites like *BoingBoing*, *Laughing Squid*, *FFFFOUND!*, and others—since they get post ideas from Reddit. From this final burst of coverage, money began pouring in, as did volunteers, recognition, and new ideas.

- Before you get upset at us, remember: We were only doing what Lindsay Robertson, a blogger from *Videogum*, *Jezebel*, and *New York* magazine's *Vulture* blog, taught us to do. In a post explaining to publicists how they could better game bloggers like herself, Lindsay advised focusing "on a lower traffic tier with the (correct) understanding that these days, content filters *up* as much as it filters down, and often the smaller sites, with their ability to dig deeper into the [I]nternet and be more nimble, act as farm teams for the larger ones."
- Consecutively and concurrently, this pattern inherently distorts and exaggerates whatever they cover.
- The more immediate the nature of their publishing mediums (blogs, then newspapers, then magazines), the more heavily a journalist will depend on sketchy online sources, like social media, for research.
- For the sake of simplicity, let's break the chain into three levels. I know these levels as one thing only: beachheads for manufacturing news. I don't think someone could have designed a system easier to manipulate if they wanted to.
- At the first level, small blogs and hyperlocal websites that cover your neighborhood or particular scene are some of the easiest sites to get traction on. Since they typically write about local, personal issues pertaining to a contained readership, trust is very high. At the same time, they are cash-strapped and traffic-hungry, always on the lookout for a big story that might draw a big spike of new viewers. It doesn't have to be local, though; it can be a site about a subject you know very well, or it can be a site run by a friend.
- For starters, they share the same URL and often get aggregated in Google News. Places like the *Wall Street Journal*, *Newsweek*, and CBS all have sister sites like [SmartMoney.com](#), [Mainstreet.com](#), [BNet.com](#), and others that feature the companies' logos but have their own editorial standards not always as rigorous as their old media counterparts'. They seem legitimate, but they are, as [Fark.com](#) founder Drew Curtis calls them, just "Mass Media Sections That Update More Often but with Less Editorial Oversight."
- You'll notice that they tend to get their story ideas from the same second-level sites, and by tailoring the story to those smaller sites (or site), it sets you up to be noticed by the larger one. The blogs on *Gawker* and *Mediabistro*, for instance, are read very heavily by the New York City media set. You can craft the story for those sites and automatically set yourself up to appeal to the other reporters reading it—without ever speaking to them directly. An example: Katie Couric claims she gets many story ideas from her Twitter followers, which means that getting a few tweets out of the seven hundred or so people she follows is all it takes to get a shot at the nightly national news.
- In creating outrage for the movie, I had a lot of luck getting local websites to cover or spread the news about protests of the screenings we had organized through anonymous tips.* They were the easiest place to get the story started. We would send them a few offensive quotes and say something like "This misogynist is coming to our school and we're so fucking pissed. Could you help spread the word?" Or I'd e-mail a neighborhood site to say that "a controversial screening with rumors of a local boycott" was happening in a few days.

- And when I want to be direct, I would register a handful of fake e-mail addresses on Gmail or Yahoo and send e-mails with a collection of all the links gathered so far and say, “How have you not done a story about this yet?” Reporters rarely get substantial tips or alerts from their readers, so to get two or even three legitimate tips about an issue is a strong signal.
- Their campaign got even more coverage than my stunt, including a 650-word, three-picture story on a *Village Voice* blog with dozens of comments (I posted some comments under fake names to get people riled up, but looking at them now I can’t tell which ones are fake and which are real). From the fake came real action.
- The media, like any group of animals, gallops in a herd. It takes just one steer to start a stampede. The first level is your lead steer. The rest is just pointing everyone’s attention to the direction it went in.

Chapter 4 - Tactic 1: Bloggers Are Poor; Help Pay Their Bills

- Twitter users are straight-up mercenary. Through various ad networks you can actually pay influential accounts to tweet a message of your choosing. And by message, I mean that they will tweet *anything*.
- All this means that if bloggers want to get rich—or even cover their rent— they’ve got to find other ways to get paid. That’s where people like me come in —with boatloads of free stuff.
- One of the quickest ways to get coverage for a product online is to give it away for free to bloggers (they’ll rarely disclose their conflict of interest). At American Apparel I have two full-time employees whose job it is to research fashion bloggers—girls who post photos of their outfits each day to thousands of readers who imitate them—and send them our newest garments. I would offer an affiliate ad deal to the most popular girls that would pay them a commission each time someone bought something from our site after seeing their photos. I’m sure you’re shocked to read how often their posts featured something from American Apparel.

Chapter 5 - Tactic 2: Tell Them What They Want To Hear

- I could not have been more wrong. Before long I came to see the truth: Blogs love press releases. It does every part of their job for them: The material is already written; the angle laid out; the subject newsworthy; and, since it comes from an official newswire, they can blame someone else if the story turns out to be wrong.
- And even if no outlets do, press releases through services like PRWeb are deliberately search- engine optimized to show up well in Google results indefinitely. Most important, investing sites like Google Finance, CNN Money, Yahoo! Finance, and Motley Fool all automatically syndicate the major release wires. If you’re a public company with a stock symbol, the good news in any release you put out shows up right in front of your most important audience: stockholders. Minutes after you put it out, it’s right there on the company’s stock page in the “Recent News” section, eagerly being read by investors and traders.

- A complete overhaul of one high-profile starlet's Wikipedia page was once followed less than a week later by a six-page spread in a big tabloid that so obviously used our positive and flattering language from Wikipedia that I was almost scared it would be its own scandal.
- It's not a stretch to convince anyone that it's easy to become a source for blogs. Cracking the mainstream media is much harder, right? Nope. There's actually a tool designed expressly for this purpose.
- It's called HARO (Help a Reporter Out), and it is a site that connects hundreds of "self-interested sources" to willing reporters every day. The service, founded by PR man Peter Shankman, is a wildly popular tool that connects journalists working on stories with people to quote in them. It is the de facto sourcing and lead factory for journalists and publicists. According to the site, nearly thirty thousand members of the media have used HARO sources, including the *New York Times*, the Associated Press, the *Huffington Post*, and everyone in-between.
- Journalists say HARO is a research tool, but it isn't. It is a tool that manufactures self-promotion to look like research. Consider alerts like
 - URGENT: [E-mail [redacted](#)][@aol.com](#) needs NEW and LITTLE known resources (apps, Websites, etc.) that offer families unique ways to save money.*

Chapter 6 - Tactic 3: Give Them What Spreads, Not What's Good

- According to the story, "the most powerful predictor of virality is *how much anger an article evokes*" [emphasis mine]. I will say it again: *The most powerful predictor of what spreads online is anger*. No wonder the outrage I created for Tucker's movie worked so well. Anger has such a profound effect that one standard deviation increase in the anger rating of an article is the equivalent of spending an additional three hours as the lead story on the front page of [NYTimes.com](#).
- The researchers found that while sadness is an extreme emotion, it is a wholly unviral one. Sadness, like what one might feel to see a stray dog shivering for warmth or a homeless man begging for money, is typically a low-arousal emotion. Sadness depresses our impulse for social sharing. It's why nobody wanted to share the Magnum photos but gladly shared the ones on the *Huffington Post*. The HuffPo photos were awe-some; they made us angry, or they surprised us. Such emotions trigger a desire to act—they are arousing—and that is exactly the reaction a publisher hopes to exploit.
- Things must be negative but not too negative. Hopelessness, despair—these drive us to do nothing. Pity, empathy—those drive us to do something, like get up from our computers to act. But anger, fear, excitement, or laughter—these drive us to spread. They drive us to do something that makes us feel as if we are doing something, when in reality we are only contributing to what is probably a superficial and utterly meaningless conversation. Online games and apps operate on the same principles and exploit the same impulses: be consuming without frustrating, manipulative without revealing the strings.

Chapter 7 - Tactic 4: Help Them Trick Their Readers



- ARE LOADED-QUESTION HEADLINES POPULAR? YOU bet. As Brian Moylan, a *Gawker* writer, once bragged, the key is to “get the whole story into the headline but leave out just enough that people will want to click.”
- I have my own analysis: When you take away the question mark, it usually turns their headline into a lie. The reason bloggers like to use them is because it lets them get away with a false statement that no one can criticize. After the reader clicks, they soon discover that the answer to the “question” in their headline is obviously, “No, of course not.” But since it was posed as a question, the blogger wasn’t *wrong*—they were only asking. “Did Glenn Beck Rape and Murder a Young Girl in 1990?” Sure, I don’t know, whatever gets clicks.
- Bloggers tell themselves that they are just tricking the reader with the headline to get them to read their nuanced, fair-er articles. But that’s a lie. (I actually read the articles, and they’re rarely any better than the headline would suggest.) This lie is just one bloggers tell to feel better about themselves, and you can exploit it. So give them a headline, it’s what they want. Let them rationalize it privately however they need to.
- When I want *Gawker* or other blogs to write about my clients I intentionally exploit their ambivalence about deceiving people. If I am giving them an official comment on behalf of a client, I leave room for them to speculate by not fully addressing the issue. If I am creating the story as a fake tipster, I ask a lot of rhetorical questions: Could [some preposterous misreading of the situation] be what’s going on? Do you think that [juicy scandal] is what they’re hiding? And then I watch as the writers pose those very same questions to their readers in a click-friendly headline. The answer to my questions is obviously, “No, of course not,” but I play the skeptic about my own clients—even going so far as to say nasty things—so the bloggers will do it on the front page of their site.
- Worse, the writer of the original material may have been so thorough as to have solved the problem or proffered a reasonable solution—two very big dampers on a getting a heated debate going.
- To use an exclamation point, to refer back to Denton’s remark, is to be final. Being final, or authoritative, or helpful, or any of these obviously positive attributes is avoided, because they don’t bait user engagement. And engaged users are where the money is.

- The best way to get online coverage is to tee a blogger up with a story that will obviously generate comments (or votes, or shares, or whatever). This impossible maze of pageviews is so lucrative that bloggers can't help but try to lure readers into it. Following that logic, when I whisper to a blog about something disgusting that Tucker Max supposedly did, what I am really doing is giving the writer a chance to invite the readers to comment with "Eww!!!" or "What a misogynist!" I'm also giving Tucker's fans a chance to hear about it and come to his defense. Nobody involved actually cares what any of these people think or are feeling—not even a little bit. But I am giving the blog a way to make money at their expense.

Chapter 8 - Tactic 5: Sell Them Something They Can Sell (Exploit the One-Off Problem)

- Blogs must fight to be that story. You can provide them the ammunition. Getting something "controversial" to blow up is easy, and it's the tactic I prefer to use over doing something "important." With limited resources and the constraints of a tight medium, there are only a handful of options: sensationalism, extremism, sex, scandal, hatred. The media manipulator knows that bloggers know that these things sell—so that's what we sell them.

Chapter 9 - Tactic 6: Make It All About the Headline

- That's where I come in. I make up the news; blogs make up the headline.
- It worked. As a young man Upton Sinclair remembered hearing the newsboys shouting "Extra!" and saw the headline "War Declared!" splashed across the front page of Hearst's *New York Evening Journal*. He parted with his hard-earned pennies and read eagerly, only to find something rather different between what he'd thought and what he'd bought. It was actually: "War (may be) Declared (soon)."
- The predicament of an online publisher today is that it has no such buffer. Its creative solution, as it was one hundred years ago, is exaggeration and lies and bogus tags like EXCLUSIVE, EXTRA, UNPRECEDENTED,* and PHOTOS in the requisite CAPITAL LETTERS. They overstate their stories, latching on to the most compelling angles and parading themselves in front of the public like a prostitute. They are more than willing for PR people and marketers to be their partners in crime.
- Compare this to a headline I conned *Jezebel* into writing for a nonevent: "Exclusive: American Apparel's Rejected Halloween Costume Ideas (American Appalling)."³ It did nearly one hundred thousand pageviews. Not only was the headline overstated, the leak was *fake*. I just had one of my employees send over some extra photos I couldn't use for legal reasons.
- It should be clear what types of headlines blogs are interested in. It's not pretty, but if that's what they want, give it to them. You don't really have a choice. They aren't going to write about you, your clients, or your story unless it can be turned into a headline that will drive traffic.

- Make it so obvious and enticing that there is no way they can pass it up. Hell, make them tone it down. They'll be so happy to have the headline that they won't bother to check whether it's true or not.

Chapter 10 - Tactic 7: Kill 'Em With Pageview Kindness

- A self-proclaimed web-first paper like the *Christian Science Monitor* scours Google Trends for story ideas that help the paper "ride the Google wave." Places like Yahoo! and Demand Media commission their stories in real time based on search data. Other sites take topics trending on Twitter and Techmeme and scurry to get a post up in order to be included in the list of articles for a particular event. Even tiny one-person blogs eagerly check their stat counters for the first sign of a spike.
- To understand bloggers, rephrase the saying as: "Simplistic measurements matter." Like, did a shitload of people see it? Must be good. Was there a raging comments section going? Awesome! Did the story get picked up on *Gawker*? It made the *Drudge Report*? Yes! In practice, this is all blogs really have time to look for, and it's easy to give it to them.
- I exploit these pseudo-metrics all the time. If other blogs have covered something, competitors rush to copy them, because they assume there is traffic in it. As a result, getting coverage on one site can simply be a matter of sending those links to an unoriginal blogger. That those links were scored under false pretenses hardly matters. How could anyone tell? Showing that a story you want written is connected to a popular or search engine-friendly topic (preferably one the site already has posts about) does the same thing. However tenuous the connection, it satisfies the pageview impulse and gives the blogger excuse to send readers to their stories. You've done something that gets them paid.
- Pageview journalism is about scale. Sites *have* to publish multiple stories every few minutes to make a profit, and why shouldn't your story be one of them?
- Once your story has gotten coverage, one of the best ways to turn yourself into a favorite and regular subject is to make it clear your story is a reliable traffic draw. If you're a brand, then post the story to your company Twitter and Facebook accounts and put it on your website. This inflates the stats in your favor and encourages more coverage down the road. There are also services that allow you to "buy traffic," sending thousands of visitors to a specific page. At the penny-per-click rates of StumbleUpon and Outbrain, one hundred dollars means a rush of one thousand people or more—illusory confirmations to the blogger that you are newsworthy. The stat counters on these sites make no distinctions between fake and real views, nor does anyone care enough to dig deep into the sources of traffic. The lure of the indirect bribe is all that matters.
- "*Who wants to say 'I did it for the page views' out loud?*"
 - The answer to that question is "almost every blogger."
- Card understood that it is incredibly difficult to interpret silence in a constructive way. Warnock's Dilemma, for its part, poses several interpretations:

- 1. The post is correct, well-written information that needs no follow-up commentary. There's nothing more to say except, "Yeah, what he said."
- 2. The post is complete and utter nonsense, and no one wants to waste the energy or bandwidth to even point this out.
- 3. No one read the post, for whatever reason.
- 4. No one understood the post but won't ask for clarification, for whatever reason.
- 5. 5. No one cares about the post, for whatever reason.
- That is where the opportunity lies: Blogs are so afraid of silence that the flimsiest of evidence can confirm they're on the right track. You can provide this by leaving fake comments to articles about you or your company from blocked IP addresses—good and bad to make it clear that there is a hot debate. Send fake e-mails to the reporter, positive and negative. This rare kind of feedback cements the impression that you or your company make for high-valence material, and the blog should be covering you. Like Peter Wiggin, publishers don't care what they say as long as it isn't bland or ignored. But by avoiding the bad kind of silence prompted by poor content, they avoid the good kind that results from the type of writing that makes people think but not say, "Yeah, what he said. I'm glad I read this article."

Chapter 11 - Tactic 8: Use the Technology Against Itself

- The message is clear: The best way to get traffic is to publish as much as possible, as quickly as possible, and as simply as possible.
- *The Huffington Post Complete Guide to Blogging* has a simple rule of thumb: Unless readers can see the end of your post coming around eight hundred words in, they're going to stop. Scrolling is a pain, as is feeling like an article will never end. This gives writers around eight hundred words to make their point—a rather tight window. Even eight hundred words is pushing it, the *Huffington Post* says, since a block of text that big on the web can be intimidating. A smart blogger, they note, will break it up with graphics or photos, and definitely some links.
- In a retrospective of his last ten years of blogging, publisher Om Malik of *GigaOM* bragged that he'd written over eleven thousand posts and 2 million words in the last decade. Which, while translating into three posts a day, means the average post was just 215 words long. But that's nothing compared to the ideal *Gawker* item. Nick Denton told a potential hire in 2008 that it was "one hundred words long. Two hundred, max. Any good idea," he said, "can be expressed at that length."
- In a University of Kentucky study of blogs about cancer, researchers found that a full 80 percent of the blog posts they analyzed contained fewer than five hundred words. The average number of words per post was 335, short enough to make the articles on the *Huffington Post* seem like lengthy manuscripts. I don't care what Nick Denton says; I'm pretty sure that the complexities of *cancer* can't be properly expressed in 100 words. Or 200, or 335, or 500, for that matter.
- Studies that have tracked the eye movements of people browsing the web show the same fickleness. The biggest draw of eyeballs is the headline, of which viewers usually

see only the first few words before moving on. After users break off from the headline their glance tends to descend downward along the left hand column, scanning for sentences that catch their attention. If nothing does, they leave. What slows this dismissive descent is the form of the article—small, short paragraphs (one to two sentences versus three to five) seem to encourage slightly higher reading rates, as does a bolded introduction or subheadline (occasionally called a deck). What blogger is going to decide they're above gimmicks such as bulleted lists when it's precisely those gimmicks that seem to keep readers on the page for a few priceless seconds longer?

- Forty percent of every article must be cut.⁴ But despair not, because according to his calculations, when chopped thus the average article loses only 30 percent of its value. *Oh, only 30 percent!* It's the kind of math publishers go through every day. As long as the equation works out in their favor, it's worth doing. What does it matter if the readers get stuck with the losses?
- If a blogger isn't willing or doesn't have the time to get off their ass to visit the stores they write about, that's their problem. It makes it that much easier to create my own version of reality. I will come to them with the story. I'll meet them on their terms, but their story will be filled with my terms. They won't take the time or show the interest to check with anyone else.

Chapter 12 - Tactic 9: Just Make Stuff Up (Everyone Else Is Doing It)

- Blogs will publish anything if you manufacture urgency around it. Give a blogger an illusionary twenty-minute head start over other media sources, and they'll write whatever you want, however you want it. Publicists love to promise blogs the exclusive on an announcement. The plural there is not an accident. You can give the same made-up exclusive to multiple blogs, and they'll all fall over themselves to publish first. Throw in an arbitrary deadline, like "We're going live with this on our website first thing in the morning," and even the biggest blogs will forget fact-checking and make bold pronouncements on your behalf.
- "Amy Winehouse's Untimely Death Is a Wake Up Call for Small Business Owners." The same holds true for reputable outlets too. They need only the slightest push to abandon all discretion, like the *Daily Mail* in the UK did when I had some deliberately provocative ads posted on the American Apparel website and pretended they were part of a new campaign. "Has American Apparel Gone too Far with 'Creepy' Controversial New Campaign?" the *Mail's* headline read. According to *whom* had it gone too far? The article quotes "Some Tweeters."
- What else could I expect? Early on I worked tirelessly to encourage bloggers to find nonexistent angles on stories I hoped they would promote. I made it worth their while—dangling pageviews, traffic, access, and occasionally advertising checks to get it going. After a point they no longer needed me to get those things. They got traffic and links by writing anything extreme about my clients, and if I wouldn't be their source, they could make one up or get someone to lie. Other advertisers were happy to profit from

stories at our expense. The *Jezebel*/Edwards cycle wasn't some conspiracy; it was partly my creation.

Chapter 13 - Irin Carmon, *The Daily Show*, and Me

- The headline of *Jezebel*'s piece: "Does American Apparel's New Nail Polish Contain Hazardous Material?"
- Carmon is a media manipulator—she just doesn't know it. She may think she is a writer, but everything about her job makes her a media manipulator. She and I are in the same racket. From the twisting of the facts, the creation of a nonexistent story, the merciless use of attention for profit—she does what I do. The system I abused was now abusing me and the people I cared about. And nobody had any idea.

Chapter 15 - Cute But Evil

- Not when the length of the video was calibrated to be precisely as long as average viewers are statistically most likely to watch.
- Would you also be surprised to hear that the content of the video was designed around popular search terms? And that the title went through multiple iterations to see which got the most clicks? And what if the video you watch after this one (and the one after that and after that) had been recommended and optimized by YouTube with the deliberate intention of making online video take up as much time in your life as television does?
- So smart manipulators simply inserted a single frame of a sexy image at exactly one of those points in order to draw clicks. Members of the YouTube Partner Program —the people who get paid for their contributions to YouTube through ad revenue and make millions for the company—are allowed to use *any* image they choose as their thumbnail, even images that don't ever appear in the video. Sure, YouTube asks that the image be "representative" but if they were actually serious about quashing profitable trickery, why allow the practice at all?

Chapter 16 - The Link Economy

- The web has its own innovation on the delegation of trust, known as "link economy." Basically it refers to the exchange of traffic and information between blogs and websites. Say the *Los Angeles Times* reports that Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie are splitting up. Perez Hilton would link to this report on his blog and add his own thoughts. Then other blogs would link to Perez's account and maybe the original *Times* source as well. This is an outgrowth from the early days of blogging, when blogs lacked the resources to do much original reporting. They relied on other outlets to break stories, which they then linked to and provided commentary on. From this came what is called the link economy, one that encouraged sites to regularly and consistently link to each other. I send you a link now, you send me a link later—we trade off doing the job of reporting.
- Like the time when *Crain's New York* emailed me to ask if American Apparel would be closing any of its stores in Manhattan because of the financial crisis. No, I replied

emphatically. *No*. So they found a real estate agent who didn't work for American Apparel to say we might. Headline: "American Apparel likely to shed some NY stores" (even though my quote in the article said we wouldn't). The *Crain's* story was linked to and used as a source by *Jezebel*, and then by *New York* magazine's *The Cut* blog, then by *Racked NY*. AOL's *Daily Finance* blog turned it into a slideshow: "10 Leading Businesses Shuttering Stores Because of Downturn." None of those sites needed to ask me any questions, since *Crain's* had asked and answered for them—they could just link.* A week later, for unknown reasons, *Crain's* republished the article under a new headline ("Unraveling American Apparel Could Put NYC Stores on the Block"), which, after showing up on Google Finance, started the same chain over again.

- A few years back a young Irish student posted a fake quotation on the Wikipedia page of composer Maurice Jarre shortly after the man died. (The obituary-friendly quote said in part, "When I die there will be a final waltz playing in my head that only I can hear.") At the time, I'm not sure the student understood the convergence of the link economy and the delegation of trust. That changed in an instant, when his fabricated quote began to appear in obituaries for the composer around the world.
- "I am 100 percent convinced that if I hadn't come forward, that quote would have gone down in history as something Maurice Jarre said, instead of something I made up," he said. "It would have become another example where, once anything is printed enough times in the media without challenge, it becomes fact."
- In the link economy, the blue stamp of an html link *seems* like it will support weight. (As had the links to *The Guardian* story containing the false quote.) If I write on my blog that "Thomas Jefferson, by his own remarks, admitted to committing acts considered felonious in the State of Virginia," you'd want to see some evidence before you were convinced. Now imagine that I added a link to the words "acts considered felonious." This link could go to anything—it could go to a dictionary definition of "felonious acts" or it could go to a pdf of the entire penal code for the state of Virginia. Either way, I have vaguely complied with the standards of the link economy. I have rested my authority on a source and linked to it, and now the burden is on the reader to disprove the validity of that link. Bloggers know this and abuse it.
- *May* becomes *is* becomes *has*, I tell my clients. That is, on the first site the fact that someone "may" be doing something becomes the fact that they "are" doing something by the time it has made the rounds. The next time they mention your name, they look back and add the past tense to their last assertion, whether or not it actually happened. This is recursion at work, officially sanctioned and very possible under the rules of the link economy.

Chapter 17 - Extortion Via the Web

- Who has to spend thousands of dollars advertising online to counteract undeserved bad press? Who ultimately hires a spinmaster like me to start filling the discussions with good things just to drown out the bullshit?

Chapter 18 - The Iterative Hustle

- Bloggers post constantly, depending on others to point out errors or send in updates, or for sources to contact them.
- A blog practicing iterative journalism would report they are hearing that Google is planning to buy Twitter or Yelp, or break the news of reports that the president has been assassinated (all falsely reported online many times now). The blog would publish the story as it investigates these facts—that is, publish the rumor first while they see if there is anything more to the story. Hypothetically, a media manipulator for Yelp would be behind the leak, knowing that getting the rumors of the acquisition out there could help them jack up the price in negotiations. I personally wouldn't kick off reports about the president's death, because I wouldn't get anything from it, but plenty of pranksters would.
- Nonetheless, following its iterative instincts, *Business Insider's* sister blog, *Silicon Alley Insider*, rushed to advance the story as a full-fledged post. Apple's stock price plummeted. Twenty-five minutes later, the story in tatters—the fake tip deleted by iReport; the rumor denied by Apple —*Business Insider* rewrites the lead with a new angle: “‘Citizen journalism’... just failed its first significant test.”⁴ Yeah, that's who failed here. You know who didn't? Those who were shorting Apple stock.
- “We're hearing ...”; “I wonder ...”; “Possibly ...”; “Lots of buzz that ...”; “Sites are reporting ...”; “Could..., Would..., Should ...”; and so on. In other words, they toss the news narrative into the stream without taking full ownership and pretend to be an impartial observer of a process they began.

Chapter 19 - The Myth of Corrections

- Like when *Business Insider* editor Henry Blodget reported “unconfirmed rumors” that three prominent journalists had been hired away from their old media jobs for blogging gigs with salaries of close to half a million dollars a year. He reported this despite the fact—as he admits, and as he quoted in the article—that a source told him the numbers were “laughable.” The next day, in a post titled “DAILY BEAST: We're Not Paying Howard Kurtz \$600,000 a Year!” he acknowledged that in response to his story another source had shot down his speculation, calling it “wildly inflated figures of hyper-active imaginations.” Not to be discouraged, Blodget finished this update with some “new information”: another set of rumors about what other journalists were being paid. All the same, he concluded—despite having the reasons for the conclusion demolished—“it looks like a new golden age for those in the news business.”
- The real golden age for journalists is the one when a guy like Blodget not only gets traffic by posting jaw-dropping rumors, but then also gets traffic the next day by shooting down the same rumors he created. And then he has the balls to start the cycle all over again with his very next breath. That he was wrong doesn't even begin to cover it: The man has an aversion to the truth and not the slightest bit of guilt about it.

- Iterative journalism advocates try to extend the expiration date of the news's specious present by asking readers to withhold judgment, check back for updates, and be responsible for their own fact-checking.* Bloggers ask for this suspended state of incredulity from readers while the news is being hashed out in front of them. But like a student taking a test and trying to slow down time so they can get to the last few questions, it's just not possible.
- The human mind "first believes, then evaluates," as one psychologist put it. To that I'd add, "as long as it doesn't get distracted first." How can we expect people to transcend their biology while they read celebrity gossip and news about sports?
- Those who saw the correction were, in fact, *more likely* to believe the initial claim than those who did not. And they held this belief *more confidently* than their peers. In other words, corrections not only don't fix the error—they backfire and make misperception worse.

Chapter 20 - Cheering On Our Own Deception

- Blogs so desperately need material that I would send them screenshots of ads and say, "Here is an exclusive leak of our new controversial ad." The next day: "Exclusive! American Apparel's Controversial New Ad." The chatter about these advertisements always perplexed me: Don't they know that generally companies have to pay to generate this kind of attention?
- There is a subset of this coverage that is all the more preposterous. Every few months blogs trot out the tired old story of how to pitch coverage to them. They advise publicists to do a better job emailing the blogger and assuaging their ego if they want the blogger to write about their clients. From a reader's perspective this is all rather strange. Why is the blog revealing how it can be manipulated? In turn, why do we not head for the hills when it is clear that blogs pass this manipulation on to us?
 - Some favorite headlines:
 - **Rules of Thumb for Pitching Silly Claims to TechCrunch** (*TechCrunch*) **How Not to Pitch a Blogger, #648** (*ReadWriteWeb*)
 - **DEAR PR FOLKS: Please Stop Sending Us "Experts" and "Story Ideas"—Here's What to Send Us Instead** (*Business Insider*)
 - **A private note to PR people** (*Scobleizer.com*)
 - **How to Pitch a Blogger** (as in, *Brazen Careerist*, the blogger writing it)
 - **The Do's and Don'ts of Online Publicity, for Some Reason** (Lindsay Robertson, *Jezebel*, *NYMag*, *Huffington Post*)
- The unintended consequence of that kind of coverage is that it is essentially a manual with step-by-step instructions on how to infiltrate and deceive that blogger with marketing. I used to be thankful when I'd see that; now I just wonder: Why are you doing this to yourselves?
- The media and the public are supposed to be on the same side. The media, when it's functioning properly, protects the public against marketers and their ceaseless attempts

to trick people into buying things. I've come to realize that that is not how it is today. Marketers and the media—me and the bloggers— we're on the same team, and way too often you are played into watching with rapt attention as we deceive you. And you don't even know that's going on because the content you get has been dressed up and fed to you as news.

Chapter 21 - The Dark Side of Snark

- The first thing we did was file a countersuit that included all sorts of completely trivial but hilarious details about the plaintiff, along with other juicy bits of gossip. Then I sent both our lawsuit and the original to bloggers—and instead of denouncing or denying anything—I made some jokes in my e-mail. It was all to hint: Make fun of the lawsuit instead of taking it seriously.

Chapter 22 - The 21st - Century Degradation Ceremony

- You used to have to be a national hero before you got the privilege of the media and the public turning on you. You had to be a president or a millionaire or an artist. Now we tear people down just as we've begun to build them up. We do this to our fameballs. Our viral video stars. Our favorite new companies. Even random citizens who pop into the news because they did something interesting, unusual, or stupid. First we celebrate them, then we turn to snark, and then, finally, to merciless decimation. No wonder only morons and narcissists enter the public sphere.

Chapter 23 - Welcome To Unreality

- "The job of journalism is to provide surprise."* News is only *news* if it departs from the routine of daily life.
- "In short," he concluded, "please stop sending us e-mails with story ideas and *just contribute directly to Business Insider*. You'll get a lot more ink for yourself and your clients and you'll save yourself a lot of wasted work"[emphasis mine]. His post was seen more than ten thousand times, and each and every view, I can only assume, was followed by a marketer cumming all over their pants.

Chapter 24 - How To Read A Blog

- WHEN YOU SEE A BLOG BEGIN WITH "ACCORDING TO A tipster ..." know that the tipster was someone like me tricking the blogger into writing what I wanted.
- When you see "We're hearing reports" know that reports could mean anything from random mentions on Twitter to message board posts, or worse.
- When you see "leaked" or "official documents" know that the leak really meant someone just emailed a blogger, and that the documents are almost certainly not official and are usually fake or fabricated for the purpose of making desired information public.

- When you see “BREAKING” or “We’ll have more details as the story develops” know that what you’re reading reached you too soon. There was no wait and see, no attempt at confirmation, no internal debate over whether the importance of the story necessitated abandoning caution. The protocol is going to press early, publishing before the basics facts are confirmed, and not caring whether it causes problem for people.
- When you see “Updated” on a story or article know that no one actually bothered to rework the story in light of the new facts—they just copied and pasted some shit at the bottom of the article.
- When you see “Sources tell us ...” know that these sources are not vetted, they are rarely corroborated, and they are desperate for attention.
- When you see a story tagged with “EXCLUSIVE” know that it means the blog and the source worked out an arrangement that included favorable coverage. Know that in many cases the source gave this exclusive to multiple sites at the same time or that the site is just taking ownership of a story they stole from a lesser-known site.
- The wisdom behind those beliefs is no longer true, yet the public marches on, armed with rules of thumb that make them targets for manipulation rather than protection.
- I have taken advantage of that naïveté. And I’m not even the worst of the bunch. I’m no different than everyone else; I too am constantly tricked—by bloggers, by publishers, by politicians, and by marketers. I’m even tricked by my own monstrous creations.

Conclusion

- Well, television is no longer the main stage of culture. The Internet is. Blogs are. YouTube is. Twitter is. And their demands control our culture exactly as television once did. Only the Internet worships a different god: Traffic. It lives and dies by clicks, because that’s what drives ad revenue and influence. The central question for the Internet is not, Is this entertaining? but, Will this get attention? Will it spread?
- Bloggers lie, distort, and attack because it is in their interest to do so. The medium believes it is giving the people what they want when it simplifies, sensationalizes, and panders. This creates countless opportunities for manipulation and influence. I now know what the cumulative effect of this manipulation is: Its effect is unreality. Surrounded by illusions, we lash out at our fellow man for his very humanness, congratulate ourselves as a cover for apathy, and confuse advertising with art. Reality. Our lives. Knowing what is important. Information. These have been the causalities.
- Many sites do this: *Drudge Report*, *Huffington Post*, *Search Engine Journal*, and so on. Free pageviews! The advertisers who paid for those impressions were robbed, and the blogs that charged for them are no more than crooks.
- Meanwhile, smaller sites that have built core audiences on trust and loyalty sell out their ad space months in advance. They have less total inventory, but they sell all of theirs at higher prices and are more profitable, sustainable businesses. Blogs scramble for a few thousand extra pageviews, and manipulate their readers to do so, because they value the wrong metrics and the wrong revenue stream. They follow short-term and short-sighted incentives.

- When intelligent people read, they ask themselves a simple question: What do I plan to do with this information? Most readers have abandoned even pretending to consider this. I imagine it's because they're afraid of the answer: There isn't a thing we can do with it. There is no practical purpose in our lives for most of what blogs produce other than distraction. When readers decide to start demanding quality over quantity, the economics of Internet content will change. Manipulation and marketing will immediately become more difficult.

Appendix A

- Here's the problem. HARO is one of the leading source providers for real media outlets -- journalists who use HARO write for *The New York Times*, ABC News, Reuters, the *Huffington Post*, and just about every other newspaper, magazine, and blog we the public go to for real, factual, reality-affecting news. The even bigger problem: anyone (I mean anyone) can sign up for a HARO account and become an "expert" today.
- We would pay celebrities to mention his upcoming book--but instead of paying them for endorsements, we would pay them to embarrass themselves. The firestorm of publicity that ensued would bring all kinds of attention to this book.
- Through the service SponsoredTweets.com -- one of the main Twitter advertising services used by celebrities and influential accounts -- we entered dozens of highly offensive, morally reprehensible messages and "made offers" to celebrities like Kim Kardashian, Snooki, Nick Cannon, and many other influential accounts that weren't run by celebs but still had large numbers of followers. Forbes.com broke the story of what we were doing first, and that story was followed a day later by Crushable.com, whose headlines summed it all up: "Tucker Max Proves You Can Pay Celebrities to Tweet Whatever You Want."
- First, I had the story posted to Fark.com, where it did more than twenty thousand views and close to two hundred comments. Then I had Tucker tweet the story and put it on his Facebook page. The Youtube series SourceFed dictated a two-minute episode to the story and drew roughly 160,000 viewers and 2,200 comments. Next, I had an assistant register several anonymous e-mail accounts and submit our stories to every celebrity gossip blog and technology blog he could find. His e-mails, which went to everyone from *Mashable* to *Gawker*, alternated from indignant to amused, but the aim was the same -- catch attention of the blogger and get him to write about the story. In some of these e-mails, I deliberately bolster the impression that the stunt was real by pretending to be offended.
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