

What is Media Manipulation?--A Definition and Explanation

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What is Media Manipulation?

If you don't know, you should. Because media manipulation currently shapes everything you read, hear and watch online. *Everything*.

In the old days, we only had a few threats to fear when it came to media manipulation: the government propagandist and the hustling publicist. They were serious threats, but vigilance worked as a clear and simple defense. They were the exceptions rather than the rule—they exploited the fact that the media was trusted and reliable. Today, with our blog and web driven media cycle, nothing can escape exaggeration, distortion, fabrication and simplification.

I know this because I am [a media manipulator](#). My job was to use the media to make people do or think things they otherwise would not. People like me are there, behind the curtain, pulling the puppet strings. But that is about to get harder: [I'm spilling my secrets to you](#) and turned my talents from exploiting media vulnerabilities to [exposing them](#)—for your benefit.

When the news is decided not by what is important but [by what readers are clicking](#); when the cycle is so fast that the news cannot be anything else but [consistently and regularly incomplete](#); when dubious scandals [scuttle election bids](#) or [knock billions from the market caps](#) of publicly traded companies; when the news frequently covers itself in stories about 'how the story unfolded'—media manipulation is the status quo. It becomes, as [Daniel Boorstin](#), author *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, once put it, a "thicket ... which stands between us and the facts of life.

Today the media—driven by blogs—is assailed on all sides, by the crushing economics of their business, dishonest sources, inhuman deadlines, pageview quotas, inaccurate information, greedy publishers, poor training, the demands of the audience, and so much more. These incentives are real, whether you're the Huffington Post or CNN or some tiny blog. They warp everything you read online—and let me tell you, [thumbnail-cheating](#) YouTube videos and paid-edit Wikipedia articles are only the beginning.

Everyone is in on the game, from bloggers to non-profits to marketers to the [New York Times](#) itself. The lure of gaming you for clicks is too appealing for anyone to resist. And when everyone is running the same racket, the the line between the real and the fake becomes indistinguishable.

The Rise of the Manipulator

At top of the pantheon of the media manipulators, of course, sits the late Andrew Brietbart. "Feeding the media is like training a dog," he once said, "You can't throw an entire steak at a dog to train it to sit. You have to give it little bits of steak over and over again until it learns." And learned it did: they followed his lead exactly in the Shirley Sherrod story, and continue to fall for the manipulations of his student, James O'Keefe, who has ravaged NPR, ACORN, and many other liberal organizations.

But in this rising class, I also place some unlikely figures. [Michael Arrington](#), former editor and founder of the popular blog [TechCrunch](#). Manipulator is the only word for Arrington, a man who once said "Getting it right is expensive, getting it first is cheap" and [made \\$25 million from around that fact](#). Nick Denton and his cabal of Gawker writers—[partially paid by how many visitors their posts get](#)—use the same tricks to get your attention and sell it to advertisers. You can see it in how Brian Moylan, one of Denton's minions, [once](#)

explained the art of online headlines: “[the key is to] get the whole story into the headline but leave out just enough that people will want to click.”

And the old threat of government abuse of the media? We know that the Bush administration was a pro at it. Think of [Dick Cheney leaking bogus information](#) to [Judith Miller](#) at the New York Times as an anonymous source and then citing himself (without disclosing the conflict) to justify the build up to the war in Iraq. He planted the information which he then alluded to as support. That happened in 2002. Today, this loop is even easier, because as political strategists like [Christian Grantham admit](#), “Campaigns understand that there are some stories that regular reporters won’t print. So they’ll give those stories to the blogs.”

So it goes: manipulators on both sides of the equation—the writers and the marketers and press agents—all influencing the news to their own benefit. I know because I used to be one of them. I plied the trade for bestselling authors and billion dollar brands. I can recognize manipulation when I see it...because I invented [many of the plays myself](#).

Where It Comes From and What to Do About It

Media manipulation [exploits the difference between perception and reality](#). The media was long a trusted source of information for the public. Today, all the barriers that made it reliable have broken down. Yet the old perceptions remain. If a random blog is half as reliable as a New York Times article that was fact checked, edited and reviewed by multiple editors, it is twice as easy to get coverage on. So manipulators (myself included) play the volume game. We know that if we can generate enough online buzz people will assume that where there is smoke there is fire...and the unreal becomes real.

This all happens because of the poor incentives. When readers don’t PAY for news, the creators of the news don’t have any loyalty to the readers either. Everything is read one off, passed around on [Facebook](#) and Twitter instead of by subscription. As a result, there is no consequence for burning anyone. Manipulators can deceive journalists because journalists are not held responsible for deceiving readers.

To combat these manipulations, we must change the incentives. If we want loyalty to the truth, we must be loyal to the people who provide us with it—whoever they are. This probably means paying for information in one form or another. It means we have to be more patient. Good information takes time to acquire after all. The idea that news can be given to us iteratively and reliably is preposterous. Screw Michael Arrington. I’d rather have my news right than first.

For more on media manipulation—both the art and the dangers of it—pick up my book, [Trust Me, I’m Lying: Confessions of a Media Manipulation](#). It’s out now from Portfolio/Penguin. Watch the [book trailer here](#).