CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ........................................... 1

BOOK ONE

FEEDING THE MONSTER

HOW BLOGS WORK

I BLOGS MAKE THE NEWS ............................... 11

II HOW TO TURN NOTHING INTO SOMETHING
    IN THREE WAY-TOO-EASY STEPS .................... 17

III THE BLOG CON: HOW PUBLISHERS MAKE
    MONEY ONLINE ..................................... 31

IV TACTIC #1: BLOGGERS ARE POOR;
    HELP PAY THEIR BILLS ............................ 41

V TACTIC #2: TELL THEM WHAT THEY WANT TO HEAR .. 49

VI TACTIC #3: GIVE THEM WHAT SPREADS,
    NOT WHAT'S GOOD .................................. 59

VII TACTIC #4: HELP THEM TRICK THEIR READERS .... 69
INTRODUCTION

IF YOU WERE BEING KIND, YOU WOULD SAY MY JOB IS IN marketing and public relations, or online strategy and advertising. But that’s a polite veneer to hide the harsh truth. I am, to put it bluntly, a media manipulator—I’m paid to deceive. My job is to lie to the media so they can lie to you. I cheat, bribe, and connive for bestselling authors and billion-dollar brands and abuse my understanding of the Internet to do it.

I have funneled millions of dollars to blogs through advertising. I’ve given breaking news to blogs instead of Good Morning America and, when that didn’t work, hired their family members. I have flown bloggers across the country, boosted their revenue by buying traffic, written their stories for them, fabricated elaborate ruses to capture their attention, and courted them with expensive meals and scoops. I’ve probably sent enough gift cards and T-shirts to fashion bloggers to clothe a small country. Why did I do all this? Because it was the only way. I did it to build them up as sources, sources that I could influence and direct for my clients. I used blogs to control the news.

It’s why I found myself at 2:00 A.M. one morning, at a deserted intersection in Los Angeles, dressed in all black. In my hand I had tape and some obscene stickers made at Kinko’s earlier in the afternoon. 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.

After I finished, we circled the block and I took photos of my work from the passenger window as if I had spotted it from the road. Across the billboards was now a two-foot-long sticker that implied that the movie’s creator—my friend, Tucker Max—deserved to have his dick caught in a trap with sharp metal hooks. Or something like that.

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.

One blog wrote back: You're not messing with me, are you?
No, I said. Trust me, I'm not lying.

The vandalized billboards and the coverage that my photos received were just a small part of the deliberately provocative campaign I did for the movie I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell. My friend Tucker had asked me to create some controversy around the movie, which was based on his bestselling book, and I did—somewhat effortlessly, it turns out. It is one of many campaigns I have done in my career, and by no means an unusual one. 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.

In under two weeks, and with no budget, thousands of college students protested the movie on their campuses nationwide, angry citizens vandalized our billboards in multiple neighborhoods, FoxNews.com ran a front-page story about the backlash, Page Six of the New York Post made their first of many mentions of Tucker, and the Chicago Transit Authority banned and stripped the movie's advertisements from their buses. To cap it all off, two different editorials railing against the film ran in the Washington Post and Chicago Tribune the week it was released. The outrage about Tucker was great enough that a few years later, it was written into the popular television show Portlandia on IFC.

I guess it is safe to admit now that the entire firestorm was, essentially, fake.

I designed the advertisements, which I bought and placed around the country, and then promptly called and left anonymous complaints about them (and leaked copies of my complaints to blogs for support). 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: "BLOW ME," the headline read.


I pulled this off with no connections, no money, and no footsteps to follow. But because of the way that blogging is structured—from the way bloggers are paid by the pageview to the way blog posts must be written to catch the reader's attention—this was all very easy to do. The system eats up the kind of material I produce. So as the manufactured storm I created played itself out in the press, real people started believing it, and it became true.

My full-time job then and now is director of marketing for American Apparel, a clothing company known for its provocative imagery and unconventional business practices. But I orchestrate these deceptions for other high-profile clients as well, from authors who sell millions of books to entrepreneurs worth hundreds of millions of dollars. I create and shape the news for them.

Usually, it is a simple hustle. 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.

"By "real" I mean that people believe it and act on it. I am saying that the infrastructure of the Internet can be used against itself to turn a manufactured piece of nonsense into widespread outrage and then action. It happens every day. Every single day.
Now I was hardly a wide-eyed kid when I left school to do this kind of PR full time. I'd seen enough in the edit wars of Wikipedia and the politics of power users in social media to know that something questionable was going on behind the scenes. Half of me knew all this but another part of me remained a believer. I had my choice of projects, and I only worked on what I believed in (and yes, that included American Apparel and Tucker Max). But I got sucked into the media underworld, getting hit after publicity hit for my clients and propagating more and more lies to do so. I struggled to keep these parts of me separate as I began to understand the media environment I was working in, and that there was something more than a little off about it.

It worked until it stopped working for me. Though I wish I could pinpoint the moment when it all fell apart, when I realized that the whole thing was a giant con, I can't. All I know is that, eventually, I did.

I studied the economics and the ecology of online media deeply in the pursuit of my craft. I wanted to understand not just how but why it worked—from the technology down to the personalities of the people who use it. As an insider with access I saw things that academics and gurus and many bloggers themselves will never see. Publishers liked to talk to me, because I controlled multimillion-dollar online advertising budgets, and they were often shockingly honest.

I began to make connections among these pieces of information and see patterns in history. In books decades out of print I saw criticism of media loopholes that had now reopened. I watched as basic psychological precepts were violated or ignored by bloggers as they reported the "news." Having seen that much of the edifice of online publishing was based on faulty assumptions and self-serving logic, I learned that I could outsmart it. This knowledge both scared and emboldened me at the same time. I confess, I turned around and used this knowledge against the public interest, and for my own gain.

An obscure item I found in the course of my research stopped me cold. It was a mention of a 1913 editorial cartoon published in the long since defunct Leslie's Illustrated Weekly Newspaper. The cartoon, it said, showed a businessman throwing coins into the mouth of a giant fang-bared monster of many arms which stood menacingly in front of him. Each of its tentacle-like arms, which were destroying the city around it, was tattooed with the words like: "Cultivating Hate," "Distorting Facts," and "Slush to Inflame." The man is an advertiser and the mouth belongs to the malicious yellow press that needs his money to survive. Underneath is a caption: THE FOOL WHO FEEDS THE MONSTER.

I knew I had to find this century-old drawing, though I wasn't sure why. As I rode the escalator through the glass canyon of the atrium and into the bowels of the central branch of the Los Angeles Public Library to search for it, it struck me that I wasn't just looking for some rare old newspaper. I was looking for myself. I knew who that fool was. He was me.

In addiction circles, those in recovery also use the image of the monster as a warning. They tell the story of a man who found a package on his porch. Inside was a little monster, but it was cute, like a puppy. He kept it and raised it. The more he fed it, the bigger it got and the more it needed to be fed. He ignored his worries as it grew bigger, more intimidating, demanding, and unpredictable, until one day, as he was playing with it, the monster attacked and nearly killed him. The realization that the situation was more than he could handle came too late—the man was no longer in control. The monster had a life of its own.

The story of the monster is a lot like my story. Except my story is not about drugs or the yellow press but of a bigger and much more modern monster—my monster is the brave new world of new media—one that I often fed and thought I controlled. I lived high and well in that world, and I believed in it until it no longer looked the same to me. Many things went down. I'm not sure where my responsibility for them begins or ends, but I am ready to talk about what happened.

I created false perceptions through blogs, which led to bad conclusions and wrong decisions—real decisions in the real world that had consequences for real people. Phrases like "known rapist" began to follow what were once playfully encouraged rumors of bad or shocking behavior designed to get blog publicity for clients. Friends were ruined and broken. Gradually I began to notice work just like mine appearing everywhere, and no one catching on to it or repairing the damage. Stocks took major hits, to the tune of tens of millions of dollars, on news from the same unreliable sources I'd often trick with fake stories.

In 2008, a Gawker blogger published e-mails stolen from my inbox by someone else trying to intimidate a client through the media. It was a
humiliating and awful experience. But with some distance I now understand that Gawker had little choice about the role they played in the matter. I know that I was as much a part of the problem as they were.

I remember one day mentioning some scandal during a dinner conversation, one that I knew was probably fake, probably a scam. I did it because it was too interesting not to pass along. I was lost in the same unreality I'd forced on other people. I found that not only did I not know what was real anymore, but that I no longer cared. To borrow from Budd Schulberg's description of a media manipulator in his classic novel The Harder They Fall, I was "indulging myself in the illusions that we can deal in filth without becoming the thing we touch." I no longer have those illusions.

Winston Churchill wrote of the appeasers of his age that "each one hopes that if he feeds the crocodile enough, the crocodile will eat him last." I was even more delusional. I thought I could skip being devoured entirely. It would never turn on me. I was in control. I was the expert. But I was wrong.

WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

Sitting next to my desk right now is a large box filled with hundreds of articles I have printed over the last several years. The articles show all the trademarks of the fakes and scams I myself have run, yet they involve many of biggest news and entertainment stories of the decade. The margins are filled with angry little notes and question marks. The satirist Juvenal wrote of "cramming whole notebooks with scribbled invective" amid the corrupt opulence of Rome; that box and this book are my notebooks from my own days inside such a world. Collectively, it was this process that opened my eyes. I hope it will have the same effect for you.

Lately I have slowed my contributions to the pile of evidence, not because the quality of the content has improved, but because hope for anything different would be silly. I'm not so foolish as to expect bloggers to know what they are talking about. I no longer expect to be informed—not when manipulation is so easy for bloggers and marketers to profit from. I can't shake the constant suspicion that others are baiting, tricking, or cheating me, just as I did to them. It's hard to browse the Internet when you are haunted by the words of A. J. Daulerio, the editor of the popular sports blog Deadspin: "It's all professional wrestling."

Some of you, by the time you are done with this book, will probably hate me for ruining it for you too. Or call me a liar. Or accuse me of exaggerating. You may not want me to expose the people behind your favorite websites as the imbeciles, charlatans, and pompous frauds they are. But it is a world of many hustlers, and you are the mark. The con is to build a brand off the backs of others. Your attention and your credulity are what's stolen.

This book isn't structured like typical business books. Instead of extended chapters, it is split into two parts, and each part is made up of short, overlapping, and reinforcing vignettes. In the first part I explain why blogs matter, how they drive the news, and how they can be manipulated. In the second I show what happens when you do this, how it backfires, and the dangerous consequences of our current system.

What follows are the methods used to manipulate bloggers and reporters at the highest levels, broken down into nine simple tactics.

Every one of these tactics reveals a critical vulnerability in our media system. I will show you where they are and what can be done with them, and help you recognize when they're being used on you. Sure, I am explaining how to take advantage of these weaknesses, but mostly I am saying that these vulnerabilities exist. It is the first time that these gaps have ever been exposed, by a critic or otherwise. Hopefully, once in the open they'll no longer work as well. I understand that there is some contradiction in this position, as there has long been in me. My dis-integration wasn't always healthy, but it does allow me to explain our problems from a unique perspective.

This book is my experience behind the scenes in the worlds of blogging, PR, and online machinations—and what those experiences say about the dominant cultural medium. I'm speaking personally and honestly about what I know, and I know this space better than just about anyone.

I didn't intend to, but I've helped pioneer a media system designed to trick, cajole, and steal every second of the most precious resource in the world—people's time. I'm going to show you every single one of these tricks, and what they mean.

What you choose to do with this information is up to you.
BOOK ONE

FEEDING THE MONSTER

HOW BLOGS WORK
BLOGS MAKE THE NEWS

We play by their rules long enough and it becomes our game.

—ORSON SCOTT CARD, Ender's Game
BLOGS MATTER

By “blog,” I’m referring collectively to all online publishing. That’s everything from Twitter accounts to major newspaper websites to web videos to group blogs with hundreds of writers. I don’t care whether the owners consider themselves blogs or not. The reality is that they are all subject to the same incentives, and they fight for attention with similar tactics.

Most people don’t understand how today’s information cycle really works. Many have no idea of how much their general worldview is influenced by the way news is generated online. What begins online ends offline.

Although there are millions of blogs out there, you’ll notice some mentioned a lot in this book: Gawker, Business Insider, Politico, BuzzFeed, Huffington Post, Drudge Report, and the like. This is not because they are the most widely read, but instead because they are mostly read by the media elite, and their proselytizing owners, Nick Denton, Henry Blodget, Jonah Peretti, and Arianna Huffington, have an immense amount of influence. A blog isn’t small if its puny readership is made up of TV producers and writers for national newspapers.

Radio DJs and news anchors once filled their broadcasts with newspaper headlines; today they repeat what they read on blogs—certain blogs more than others. Stories from blogs also filter into real conversations and rumors that spread from person to person through word of mouth. In short, blogs are vehicles from which mass media reporters—and your most chatty and “informed” friends—discover and borrow the news. This hidden cycle gives birth to the memes that become our cultural references, the budding stars who become our celebrities, the thinkers who become our gurus, and the news that becomes our news.

When I figured this out early in my career in public relations I thought what only a naive and destructively ambitious twentysomething would have: If I master the rules that govern blogs, I can be the master of all they determine. It was, essentially, access to a fiat over culture.

It may have been a dangerous thought, but it wasn’t hyperbole. In the

*I have never been a fan of the word “bloginfosphere” and will use it only sparingly.

I CALL TO YOUR ATTENTION AN ARTICLE IN THE NEW York Times written at the earliest of the earliest junctures of the 2012 presidential election, nearly two years before votes would be cast.1

It told of a then obscure figure, Tim Pawlenty, the governor of Minnesota. Pawlenty was not yet a presidential candidate. He had no campaign director, no bus, few donors, and little name recognition. In fact, he did not even have a campaign. It was January 2011, after all. What he did have was a beat reporter from the blog Politico following him from town to town with a camera and a laptop, reporting every moment of his noncampaign.

It’s a bit peculiar, if you think about it. Even the New York Times, the newspaper that spends millions of dollars a year for a Baghdad bureau, which can fund investigative reports five or ten years in the making, didn’t have a reporter covering Pawlenty. Yet Politico, a blog with only a fraction of the resources of a major newspaper, did. The Times was covering Politico covering a noncandidate.

It was a little like a Ponzi scheme, and like all such schemes, it went from boom to bust. Pawlenty became a candidate, coverage of him generated millions of impressions online, then in print, and finally on television, before he flamed out and withdrew from the race. Despite all of this, his candidacy’s impact on the election was significant and real enough that the next Republican front-runner courted Pawlenty’s endorsement.

There’s a famous twentieth-century political cartoon about the Associated Press that was, at the time, the wire service responsible for supplying news to the majority of the newspapers in the United States. In it an AP agent is pouring different bottles into a city’s water supply. The bottles are labeled “lies,” “prejudice,” “slander,” “suppressed facts,” and “hatred.” The image reads: “The News—Poisoned At Its Source.”

I think of blogs as today’s newswires.
Pawlenty case, the guy could have become the president of the United States of America. 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.

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**SO, WHY DID POLITICO FOLLOW PAWLENTY?**

On the face of it, it’s pretty crazy. Pawlenty’s phantom candidacy wasn’t newsworthy, and if the *New York Times* couldn’t afford to pay a reporter to follow him around, *Politico* shouldn’t have been able to.

It wasn’t crazy. Blogs need things to cover. The *Times* has to fill a newspaper only once per day. A cable news channel has to fill twenty-four hours of programming 365 days a year. But blogs have to fill an infinite amount of space. The site that covers the most stuff wins.

Political blogs know that their traffic goes up during election cycles. Since traffic is what they sell to advertisers, elections equal increased revenue. Unfortunately, election cycles come only every few years. Worse still, they end. Blogs have a simple solution: change reality through the coverage.

With Pawlenty, *Politico* was not only manufacturing a candidate, they were manufacturing an entire leg of the election cycle purely to profit from it. It was a conscious decision. In the story about his business, *Politico’s* executive editor, Jim VandeHei, tipped his hand to the *New York Times*: “We were a garage band in 2008, riffing on the fly. Now we’re a 200-person production, with a precise feel and plan. We’re trying to take a leap forward in front of everyone else.”

When a blog like *Politico* tried to leap in front of everyone else, the person they arbitrarily decided to cover was turned into an actual candidate. The campaign starts gradually, with a few mentions on blogs, moves on to “potential contender,” begins to be considered for debates, and is then included on the ballot. Their platform accumulates real supporters who donate real time and money to the campaign. The campaign buzz is reified by the mass media, who covers and legitimizes whatever is being talked about online.

Pawlenty’s campaign for elected office may have failed, but for blogs and other media, it was profitable success. He generated millions of pageviews for blogs, was the subject of dozens of stories in print and online, and had his fair share of television time. When *Politico* picked Pawlenty they made the only bet worth making—where they had the power to control the outcome.

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

You’ll see this cycle repeated again and again in this book. It’s true for celebrity gossip, politics, business news, and every other topic blogs cover. The constraints of blogging create artificial content, which is made real and impacts the outcome of real world events.

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.

Later in the election, Politico moved the goalposts again to stay on top. Speed stopped working so well, so they turned to scandal to upend the race once more. Remember Herman Cain, the preposterous, media-created candidate who came after Pawlenty? After surging ahead as the lead contender for the Republican nomination, and becoming the subject of an exhausting number of traffic-friendly blog posts, Cain's candidacy was utterly decimated by a sensational but still strongly denied scandal reported by... you guessed it: Politico.

I'm sure there were powerful political interests that could not allow Cain to become anything more than a sideshow. So his narrative was changed, and some suspect it was done by a person just like me, hired by another candidate's campaign—and the story spread, whether it was true or not. If true, from the looks of it whoever delivered the fatal blow did it exactly the way I would have: painfully, untraceably, and impossible to recover from.

And so another noncandidate was created, made real, and then taken out. Another one bit the dust so that blogs could fill their cycle.

II

HOW TO TURN NOTHING INTO SOMETHING IN THREE WAY-TOO-EASY STEPS

Some people in the press, I think, are just lazy as hell. There are times when I pitch a story and they do it word for word. That's just embarrassing. They're adjusting to a time that demands less quality and more quantity. And it works to my advantage most of the time, because I think most reporters have liked me packaging things for them. Most people will opt for what's easier, so they can move on to the next thing. Reporters are measured by how often their stuff gets on Drudge. It's a bad way to be, but it's reality.

— KURT BARDELLA, FORMER PRESS SECRETARY FOR REPUBLICAN CONGRESSMAN DARRELL ISSA
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.

The work I do is not exactly respectable. But I want to explain how it works without any of the negatives associated with my infamous clients. I'll show how I manipulated the media for a good cause.

A friend of mine recently used some of my advice on trading up the chain for the benefit of the charity he runs. This friend needed to raise money to cover the costs of a community art project, and chose to do it through Kickstarter, the crowdsourced fund-raising platform. With just a few days' work, he turned an obscure cause into a popular Internet meme and raised nearly ten thousand dollars to expand the charity internationally.

Following my instructions, he made a YouTube video for the Kickstarter page showing off his charity's work. 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.

When the CBS News piece came out and the video was up, he was ready to post it all on Reddit. 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, FFFFFound!, 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.

With no advertising budget, no publicist, and no experience, his little video did nearly a half million views, and funded his project for the next two years. It went from nothing to something.

This may have all been for charity, but it still raises a critical question: What exactly happened? How was it so easy for him to manipulate the media, even for a good cause? He turned one exaggerated amateur video into a news story that was written about independently by dozens of outlets in dozens of markets and did millions of media impressions. It even registered nationally. He had created and then manipulated this attention entirely by himself.

Before you get upset at us, remember: We were only doing what Lindsay Robertson, a blogger from Videojunk, 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."

Blogs have enormous influence over other blogs, making it possible to turn a post on a site with only a little traffic into posts on much bigger sites, if the latter happens to read the former. Blogs compete to get stories

*Proving this theory unnervingly correct, Newsweek picked up the Lindsay's advice from her tiny personal blog and reposted it on the official Newsweek Tumblr.
first, newspapers compete to “confirm” it, and then pundits compete for airtime to opine on it. The smaller sites legitimize the newsworthiness of the story for the sites with bigger audiences. Consecutively and concurrently, this pattern inherently distorts and exaggerates whatever they cover.

THE LAY OF THE LAND

Here’s how it works. There are thousands of bloggers scouring the web looking for things to write about. They must write several times each day. They search Twitter, Facebook, comments sections, press releases, rival blogs, and other sources to develop their material.

Above them are hundreds of mid-level online and offline journalists on websites and blogs and in magazines and newspapers who use those bloggers below them as sources and filters. They also have to write constantly—and engage in the same search for buzz, only a little more developed.

Above them are the major national websites, publications, and television stations. They in turn browse the scourers below them for their material, grabbing their leads and turning them into truly national conversations. These are the most influential bunch—the New York Times, the Today Show, and CNN—and dwindling revenues or not, they have massive reach.

Finally, between, above, and throughout these concentric levels is the largest group: us, the audience. We scan the web for material that we can watch, comment on, or share with our friends and followers.

It’s bloggers informing bloggers informing bloggers all the way down. This isn’t anecdotal observation. It is fact. In a media monitoring study done by Cision and George Washington University, 89 percent of journalists reported using blogs for their research for stories. Roughly half reported using Twitter to find and research stories, and more than two thirds use other social networks, such as Facebook or LinkedIn, in the same way. 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.

Recklessness, laziness, however you want to categorize it, the attitude is openly tolerated and acknowledged. The majority of journalists surveyed admitted to knowing that their online sources were less reliable than traditional ones. Not a single journalist said they believed that the information gathered from social media was “a lot more reliable” than traditional media! Why? Because it suffers from a “lack of fact-checking, verification or reporting standards.”

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.

Level 1: The Entry Point

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.

What’s important is that the site is small and understaffed. This makes it possible to sell them a story that is only loosely connected to their core message but really sets you up to transition to the next level.

Level 2: The Legacy Media

Here we begin to see a mix of online and offline sources. The blogs of newspapers and local television stations are some of the best targets. 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.”

Legacy media outlets are critical turning points in building up momentum. The reality is that the bloggers at Forbes.com or the Chicago Tribune do not operate on the same editorial guidelines as their print counterparts. However, their final output can be made to look like they carry the same weight. If you get a blog on Wired.com to mention your startup, you can smack “A revolutionary device”—Wired had put your CEO on the cover of the magazine.

These sites won’t write about just anything, though, so you need to create chatter or a strong story angle to hook this kind of sucker. Their illusion of legitimacy comes at the cost of being slightly more selective when it comes to what they cover. But it is worth the price, because it will grant the bigger websites in your sights later the privilege of using magic words like: “NBC is reporting . . .”

Level 3: National

Having registered multiple stories from multiple sources firmly onto the radar of both local and midlevel outlets, you can now leverage this coverage to access the highest level of media: the national press. Getting to this level usually involves less direct pushing and a lot more massaging. The sites that have already taken your bait are now on your side. They desperately want their articles to get as much traffic as possible, and being linked to or mentioned on national sites is how they do that. These sites will take care of submitting your articles to news aggregator sites like Digg, because making the front page will drive tens of thousands of visitors to their article. Mass media reporters monitor aggregators for story ideas, and often cover what is trending there, like they did with the charity story after it made the front page of Reddit. In today’s world even these guys have to think like bloggers—they need to get as many page-views as possible. Success on the lower levels of the media chain is evidence that the story could deliver even better results from a national platform.

You just want to make sure that such reporters notice the story’s gain-

ing traction. Take the outlet where you’d ultimately like to receive coverage and observe it for patterns. 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 Mediatribu, 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.

News anchors aren’t the only people susceptible to this trick. Scott Vener, the famous hit maker responsible for picking the songs that go into HBO’s trendiest shows, like Entourage and How to Make It in America, has a reputation for discovering “unknown artists.” Really, he admits, most of the music he finds is just “what is bubbling up on the Internet.” Since Vener monitors conversations on Twitter and the comments on trendy music blogs, a shot at a six-figure HBO payday and instant mainstream exposure is just a few manufactured bubbles away.

It’s a simple illusion: Create the perception that the meme already exists and all the reporter (or the music supervisor or celebrity stylist) is doing is popularizing it. They rarely bother to look past the first impressions.

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**LEVELS 1, 2, 3:**

**HOW I TRADED UP THE CHAIN**

My campaign for I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell began by vandalizing the billboards. The graffiti was designed to bait two specific sites, Curbed Los Angeles and Mediatribu’s FishbowlLA. When I sent them photos of my work under the fake name Evan Meyer, they both quickly picked it up. (For his contributions as a tipster, Evan earned his own Mediatribu profile, which still exists. According to the site he has not been “sighted” since.)

Curbed LA began their post by using my e-mail verbatim:
A reader writes: "I saw these on my way home last night. It was on 3rd and Crescent Heights, I think. Good to know Los Angeles hates him too." Provocateur Tucker Max’s new movie “I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell” opens this weekend [emphasis mine].

Thanks for the plug!

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.

Sex, college protesters, Hollywood—it was the definition of the kind of local story news producers love. After reading about the growing controversy on the small blogs I conned, they would often send camera crews to the screenings. The video of the story would get posted on the station’s website, and then get covered again by the other, larger blogs in that city, like those hosted by a newspaper or companies like the Huffington Post. I was able to get the story to register, however briefly, by using a small site with low standards of newsworthiness. Other media outlets might be alerted to this fact, and in turn cover it, giving me another bump. At this point I now have something to work with. Three or four links are the makings of a trend piece, or even a controversy—that’s all major outlets and national website need to see to get excited. Former Slate.com media critic Jake Shafer called such manufactured online controversy “provocation”—a portmanteau of faux provocation. It works incredibly well.

The key to getting from the second to the third level is the soft sell. I couldn’t very well e-mail a columnist at the Washington Post and say, “Hey, will you denounce our movie so we can benefit from the negative PR?” So I targeted the sites that those kinds of columnists were likely to read. Gawker and Mediabistro are very media-centric, so we tailored stories to them to queue ourselves up for outrage from their audiences—which happen to include reporters at places like the Washington Post.

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.

So I sent it to them. Well, kind of. I actually just did more of the same fake tips from fake e-mail addresses that worked for the other sites—only this time I had a handful of links from major blogs that made it clear that everyone was talking about it. At this point something amazing happened: The coverage my stunts received began helping the twenty-thousand-dollar-a-month publicist the movie had hired. Rejections from late-night television, newspaper interviews, and morning radio turned into callbacks. Tucker did Carson Daly’s NBC late-night show for the first time. By the end of this charade, hundreds of reputable reporters, producers, and bloggers had been swept up into participating. Thousands more had eagerly gobbled up news about it on multiple blogs. Each time they did, views of the movie trailer spiked, book sales increased, and Tucker became more famous and more controversial. If only people had known they were promoting the offensive Tucker Max brand for us, just as we’d planned.

With just: a few simple moves, I’d taken his story from level 1 to level 3—not just once but several times, back and forth. Ultimately the movie did not do nearly as well at release as we’d hoped—this supplementary guerrilla marketing ended up being the entirety of the movie’s advertising efforts rather than a small part of it for reasons outside of my control—but the attention generated by the campaign was overwhelming and incredibly lucrative. Eventually the movie became a cult hit on DVD.

Once you get a story like this started it takes on a life of its own. That’s

*It is standard practice in journalism that the identity of anonymous sources must be shared with the editor so that they know the person is real and the writer hasn’t been tricked. I have been used as an anonymous source for blogs dozens of times. No one has ever asked my identity. I’ve never been verified, and I have never spoken to an editor.

*In fact, a few years later one of the sites we exploited repeatedly while promoting the movie wrote a post titled: “Are traditional news media stealing scoops from bloggers?”, which accused the Chicago Tribune of stealing article ideas from her blog Chicago Now. She was right, they were stealing, and that’s exactly how we got coverage into the editorial page of the Tribune.
what happened after I vandalized Tucker’s billboards. Exactly one week later, inspired by my example, sixteen feminists gathered in New York City late at night to vandalize I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell posters all over Manhattan. 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: DANCING WITH ITSELF

Trading up the chain relies on a concept created by crisis public relations expert Michael Sitrick. When attempting to turn things around for a particularly disliked or controversial client, Sitrick was fond of saying, “We need to find a lead steer!” The media, like any group of animals, galleys 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.

Remember: Every person (with the exception of a few at the top layer) in this ecosystem is under immense pressure to produce content under the tightest of deadlines. Yes, you have something to sell. But more than ever they desperately, desperately need to buy. The flimsiest of excuses is all it takes.

It freaked me out when I began to see this sort of thing happen without the deliberate prodding of a promoter like myself. I saw media conflagrations set off by internal sparks. In this networked, interdependent world of blogging, misinformation can spread even when no one is consciously pushing or manipulating it. The system is so primed, tuned, and ready that often it doesn’t need people like me. The monster can feed itself.

Sometimes just a single quote taken out of context can set things off. In early 2011, a gossip reporter for an AOL entertainment blog asked former quarterback Kurt Warner who he thought would be the next athlete to join the show Dancing with the Stars. Warner jokingly suggested Brett Favre, who was then embroiled in a sexual harassment scandal. Though the show told him they wanted nothing to do with Favre, the reporter still titled the post “Brett Favre Is Kurt Warner’s Pick to Join Dancing: ‘Controversy Is Good for Ratings,’” and tagged it as an exclusive. The post made it clear that Warner was just goofing around.

Two days later the blog Bleacher Report linked to the piece but made it sound as though Warner was seriously urging Favre to join the show (which, remember, had just told AOL they wanted nothing to do with Favre).

After their story, the rumor started to multiply rapidly. A reporter from a local TV-news website, KCCI Des Moines, caught the story and wrote a sixty-two-word piece titled “Brett Favre’s Next Big Step?” and mentioned the “rumors” discussed on Bleacher Report. From there the piece was picked up by USA Today—“Brett Favre Joining ‘Dancing With the Stars’ Season 12 Cast?”—ProFootballTalk, and others, making the full transition to the national stage.

To recap what happened: a gossip blog manufactured a scoop by misrepresenting, deliberately or not, a joke. That scoop was itself misrepresented and misinterpreted as it traveled up the chain, going from a small entertainment blog to a sports site to a CBS affiliate in Iowa and eventually to the website of one of the biggest newspapers in the country. What spread was not even a rumor, which at least would have been logical. It was just an empty bit of nothing.

The fake Favre meme spread almost exactly along the lines of my fake outrage campaign for Tucker’s movie—only there was no me involved! The media is hopelessly interdependent. Not only is the web susceptible to spreading false information, but it can also be the source of it.

For a gossip story, it’s not a big deal. But the same weakness creates the opportunity for dangerous, even deadly, abuses of the system.

A TRUE FOOL FEEDING THE MONSTER

I am obviously jaded and cynical about trading up the chain. How could I not be? It’s basically possible to run anything through this chain, even

*This was excellently caught and detailed by Quickish in its post “Brett Favre on Dancing With the Stars? No. Not Even a Rumor”; their research was promptly stolen and reposted by the oft-guilty Deadspin for an easy twenty-five thousand pageviews.
utterly preposterous and made-up information. But for a long time I thought that fabricated media stories could only hurt feelings and waste time. I didn't think anyone could die because of it.

I was wrong. Perhaps you remember Terry Jones, the idiotic pastor whose burning of the Koran in March 2011 led to riots that killed nearly thirty people in Afghanistan. Jones's bigotry happened to trade up the chain perfectly, and the media unwittingly allowed it. Jones first made a name for himself in the local Florida press by running offensive billboards in front of his church. Then he stepped it up, announcing that he planned to stage a burning of the Koran. This story was picked up by a small website called Religion News Service. Yahoo linked to their short article, and dozens of blogs followed, which led CNN to invite Jones to appear on the network. He was now a national story.

Yet the media and the public, aware of the potential implications of airing video of his act, began to push back. Many decided they would not air such a video. Some five hundred people attended a protest in Kabul where they burned Jones in effigy. At the last second Jones, under pressure, backed down, and the crisis was averted.

But Terry Jones was back a few months later, announcing for the second time that he planned to burn the Koran. Each blog and outlet that covered the lead-up to the burning made the story—and the media monster that was Terry Jones—that much bolder and bigger. Reporters asked if a direct request from President Obama would stop him, which of course meant that the president of the United States of America would have to negotiate with a homegrown terrorist (he traded up the chain to the most powerful man in the world).

This circus was what finally pushed Jones over the edge. In March 2011, he went through with the burning, despite the threatened media blackout.

He called their bluff and it worked. The blackout fell apart when a college student named Andrew Ford, freelancing for the wire service Agence France-Presse, took advantage of a story too dirty and dangerous for many journalists to touch in good conscience.*

Agence France-Presse, Ford's publisher, is syndicated on Google and Yahoo! News. They immediately republished his article. The story began to go up the chain, getting bigger and bigger. Roughly thirty larger blogs and online news services had picked up Ford's piece or linked to it in the first day. It made the story too big for the rest of the media—including the foreign press—to continue to resist. So the news of Jones's Koran burning, a calculated stunt to extract attention from a system that could not prevent itself from being exploited, became known to the world. And it was a deadly monster of a story.

Within days, twenty-seven people were killed during riots in Afghanistan, including seven UN workers; forty more were injured. Christians were specifically targeted, and Taliban flags were flown in the streets of the Kabul. "It took just one college student to defeat a media blackout and move a story halfway around the globe within twenty-four hours," the Poynter Institute wrote in an analysis of the reporting. This was, as Forbes journalist Jeff Bercovici put it, truly an example of "when Journalism 2.0 kills."

One kook, one overeager young journalist, unintentionally show how trading up the chain—feeding the monster—can be so dangerous (though for Jones, very effective). They weren't just turning nothing into something. The beast these blogs built up was set off needless bloodshed.

You can trade up the chain for charity or you can trade it up to create funny fake news—or you can do it to create violence, hatred, and even incidentally, death. I've done the first two, while others, out of negligence or malice, have done the latter. At the end of the day, intentions are not a justification I'm going to hide behind. There is more than enough blame to go around.

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III

THE BLOG CON

HOW PUBLISHERS MAKE MONEY ONLINE

Media companies can very much be in a race against time for growth. Investors want a return on their money and, given the economics of web news, that almost always requires exponential growth in uniques and pageviews.

—RYAN MCCARTHY, REUTERS

Picture a galley rowed by slaves and commanded by pirates.

—TIM RUTTEN, LOS ANGELES TIMES, ON THE HUFFINGTON POST BUSINESS MODEL
STRIPPED BARE, THE ECONOMICS OF ONLINE NEWS—the way blogging really works—is a shocking thing. I've never been desperate enough to need to work inside the system as a lowly (un-) paid blogger, but as an outsider (a press agent and a media buyer), I saw plenty. What I learned is the ways that sites such as AOL, the Huffington Post, and even the website of the New York Times make their money, and how much money they actually make.

This matters, because as businesses designed to make money, the way in which they do business is the main filter for how they do the news. Every story they produce must contort itself to fit this mold—whatever the topic or subject. I will show you this by explaining exactly how I have exploited these economics for my own personal gain. You’re free to view these lessons as opportunities or as loopholes that must be closed. I see them as both.

TRAFFIC IS MONEY

On the face of it, blogs make their money from selling advertisements. These advertisements are paid for by the impression (generally a rate per thousand impressions). A site might have several ad units on each page; the publisher's revenue equals the cumulative CPM (cost per thousand) multiplied by the number of pageviews. Advertisement × Traffic = Revenue. An ad buyer like me buys this space by the millions—ten million impressions on this site, five million on another, fifty million through a network. A few blogs produce a portion of their revenue through selling extras—hosting conferences or affiliate deals—but, for the most part, this is the business: Traffic is money.

A portion of the advertising on blogs is sold directly by the publisher, a portion is sold by sales reps who work on commission, and the rest is sold by advertising networks that specialize in the remaining inventory. Regardless of who sells it or who buys it, what matters is that every ad impression on a site is monetized, if only for a few pennies. Each and every pageview is money in the pocket of the publisher.

Publishers and advertisers can't differentiate between the types of impressions an ad does on a site. A perusing reader is no better than an accidental reader. An article that provides worthwhile advice is no more valuable than one instantly forgotten. So long as the page loads and the ads are seen, both sides are fulfilling their purpose. A click is a click.

Knowing this, blogs do everything they can to increase the latter variable in the equation (traffic, pageviews). It’s how you must understand them as a business. Every decision a publisher makes is ruled by one dictum: traffic by any means.

Scoops Are Traffic

One of the biggest shocks to the online world was the launch of TMZ. The blog was developed by AOL in 2005, and revenues skyrocketed to nearly $20 million a year almost immediately, paving the way for its now famous television program. This was all accomplished through a handful of major scoops. Or at least, TMZ's special definition of "scoops."

The blog's founder, Harvey Levin, once said in an interview that TMZ is "a serious news operation that has the same rigid standards that any news operation in America has." This is the same site that once published, at 4:07 a.m., an exclusive scoop: a blurry, never-before-seen photo of future president John F. Kennedy on a boat filled with naked women. This EXCLUSIVE scoop was Headlined "The JFK Photo That Could Have Changed History." Only it couldn't have altered world events for one simple reason: The man in the photo wasn't JFK. In fact, it turned out to be a spread from a 1967 issue of Playboy. Oops!

Despite missteps like this, TMZ turned scoop-getting into a science. They broke the story of Mel Gibson's anti-Semitic outbursts during his DUI arrest. And then got video of Michael Richards's racist onstage meltdown, posted the bruised Rihanna police photo, and announced the news of Michael Jackson's death. TMZ originated four of the biggest stories to
come from the Internet and captured a substantial audience from these enormous surges of traffic." They didn’t always use the most reputable or reliable means of getting their scoops, but nevertheless, today when people think celebrity news, they think of TMZ. (They don’t think of Defamer, Gawker’s predecessor to TMZ, which was shuttered because it couldn’t deliver any scoops and they don’t like Perez Hilton’s silly little drawings anymore either.)

It sent a very clear message to publishers: Exclusives build blogs. Scoops equal traffic.

The thing is, exclusive scoops are rare, and at the very least, they require some effort to obtain. So greedy blogs have perfected what is called the "pseudo-exclusive." In a private memo to his employees, Nick Denton, founder and publisher of the Gawker Media blog empire, asked the writers to use this technique, because it allows them "to take ownership of a story even if it isn’t a strict exclusive." In other words, pretend they have a scoop. The strategy works well, because many readers will see the story in only one place; they have no idea that it was actually broken or originally reported elsewhere.

One of Gawker’s biggest scoops early on in the race—certainly a TMZ-level story—was a collection of Tom Cruise Scientology videos. It is a good example of a pseudo-exclusive, since the work wasn’t done by the site who eventually got all the pageviews from it. Since I witnessed the story unfold behind the scenes, I know that tapes were actually unearthed by Hollywood journalist Mark Ebner, whose blog I was advising at the time. Ebner called me, very excited with news of a potentially huge scoop and said that he’d bring over the materials. A few hours later, he gave me some DVDs in an envelope marked confidential, which I watched later that night with a friend. Our stupid reaction: “Tom Cruise being crazy; how is that new?”

Gawker had a different reaction. See, Ebner had also shown the clips to his friends at Gawker, who turned around and immediately posted a story featuring the videos before Mark or anyone else had a chance to. I don’t know whether Gawker promised Mark they’d give him credit. All I know is that what happened was shitty: Their post went on to do 3.2 million views and bring their site a whole new audience. Mark received nothing, because Gawker didn’t link back to his site—which would have been the right thing to do. By doing this, Gawker owned a story that was not theirs. Only after did I begin to understand how blog fortunes were made: off the backs of others.

When all it takes is one story to propel a blog from the dregs of the Internet to mainstream notoriety, it shouldn’t come as a surprise that sites will do anything to get their shot, even if it means manufacturing or stealing scoops (and deceiving readers and advertisers in the process).

Established media doesn’t have this problem. They aren’t anxious for name recognition, because they already have it. Instead of bending the rules (and the truth) to get it, their main concern for their business model is to protect their reputations. This is a critical difference. Media was once about protecting a name; on the web it is about building one.

### Using Names to Build a Name

Blogs are built on scoops and traffic, and this is made possible by big names. The economics of the Internet values consistent hitters, and so one of the safest bets a site can make is to lock up an all-star or A-list blogger to helm their business. Like so much of the history of blogging, this trend begins with Gawker... sort of.

In 2004, Jason Calacanis, the founder of Weblogs, Inc., poached editor Pete Rojas away from Gizmodo, at the time the dominant gadget blog owned by Gawker. He gave Rojas a small equity stake in his company, and together they founded Engadget, which quickly surpassed Gizmodo as the reigning champion of scoops and big stories. After founding Engadget, Rojas created another site for Calacanis, this time a video game blog called Joystiq, which became another enormously popular site.

Next, there is Andrew Sullivan, who makes Rojas look like a minor league player. Sullivan’s name and blog, The Dish, is one of the most sought-after to build a site around. His now decade-old site was first leased by Time magazine’s website and spent several years under their domain. He was then stolen away from Time.com by TheAtlantic.com to bring digital life to the faltering print publication. Sullivan delivered; his Daily Dish would eventually draw more than one million visitors a month.

*Exclusives, as they are called, are important for another reason. Advertising a story as an exclusive by extension takes a dig at a publication’s competitors: “We got this story and they didn’t—because we’re better.” This is partly why a site would rather post a weak exclusive on its front page than a more interesting story they’ve been forced to share with others.*
to *The Atlantic*. Like any franchise athlete, they were able to build a team around him, using his name to attract writers and influential readers. In 2011, Sullivan left for *The Daily Beast*, in order to start the cycle all over again—but the bump in traffic and prestige stayed at *The Atlantic*. *The Daily Beast*, fresh from its merger with *Newsweek*, was equally desperate for traffic and name recognition and was willing to pay serious money for a shot of Sullivan’s brand-building power.

Bringing in big (online) names is now a go-to move for sites trying to build traffic. The *New York Times* brought the *Freakonomics* blog under their umbrella in 2007, and later did the same with Nate Silver’s FiveThirtyEight.com. BSMedia launched Crushable.com and TheGloss.com under the charge of notorious *Gawker* founding editor Elizabeth Spiers. The *Huffington Post* built most of its original cache by having celebrities blog on the site, a rarer feat than it is now. The list goes on and on.

All these bloggers, from Sullivan to Rojas to Spiers, got their high-paying gigs (and often a percentage of a site’s revenue) because they built big names for themselves. Their strategy is the same as their publisher’s: Build a brand by courting controversy, breaking big scoops, driving comments, and publishing constantly. And their big deals with sites like the *New York Times* or *The Daily Beast* make these questionable tactics all the more necessary. The big names have to stay big to stay on top.

**THE BLOG CON: NAMES, SCOOPS, AND TRAFFIC CREATE AN EXIT**

I’ve written about how sites engage in an endless chase for revenue through pageviews, and that is what they do. However, blogs are not intended to be profitable and independent businesses. The tools they use to build traffic and revenue are part of a larger play.

Blogs are built to be sold. Though they make substantial revenues from advertising, the real money is in selling the entire site to a larger company for a multiple of the traffic and earnings. Usually to a rich sucker.

Weblogs, Inc. was sold to AOL for $25 million. The *Huffington Post* was sold to AOL for $315 million in cash, with its owner, Arianna Huffington, deliberately eschewing the opportunity to wait and build for an IPO. *TechCrunch* was also sold to AOL for $30 million. Discovery bought the blog *TreeHugger* for $10 million. *Ars Technica* was sold to Condé Nast for more than $20 million. *Know Your Meme* was acquired by Cheezburger Media for seven figures. FOX Sports Interactive purchased the sports blog network *Yardbarker*. I worked on an acquisition like this myself when The Collective, a talent management company I advise, bought *Bloody Disgusting*, a blog about horror films, with an eye on potentially selling it to someone bigger down the line.

Blogs are built and run with an exit in mind. This is really why they need scoops and acquire marquee bloggers—to build up their names for investors and to show a trend of rapidly increasing traffic. The pressure for this traffic in a short period of time is intense. And desperation, as a media manipulator knows, is the greatest quality you can hope for in a potential victim. Each blog is its own mini-Ponzi scheme, for which traffic growth is more important than solid financials, brand recognition more important than trust, and scale more important than business sense. Blogs are built so someone else will want it—one stupid buyer cashing out the previous one—and millions of dollars are exchanged for essentially worthless assets.

**ANYTHING GOES IN THE DEN OF THIEVES**

It doesn’t surprise me at all that shady business deals and conflicts of interest abound in this world. My favorite example, of course, is myself. I am regularly the online ad buyer and the publicist or PR contact for the clients I represent. So the same sites that snarkily cover my companies also depend on me for large six- or even seven-figure checks each year. On the same day a writer for a blog might be e-mailing me for information about a rumor they heard, their publisher is calling me on the phone asking if I want to increase the size of my ad buy. Later in this book I’ll write about how difficult it is to get bloggers to correct even blatantly inaccurate stories—this conflict of interest was one of the only effective tools I could use to combat that. Naturally, nobody minded
what I was doing, because they were too busy lining their own pockets to care.

Michael Arrington, the loudmouth founder and former editor in chief of TechCrunch, is famous for investing in the start-ups that his blogs would then cover. Although he no longer runs TechCrunch, he was a partner in two investment funds during his tenure and now manages his own, CrunchFund. In other words, even when he is not a direct investor he has connections or interests in dozens of companies on his beat, and his insider knowledge helps turn profits for the firm.

When criticized for these conflicts he responded by saying that his competitors were simply jealous because he was—I’m not kidding—“a lot better than them.” So when Arrington blew the lid off a secret meeting of angel investors in Silicon Valley in 2011—later known as “Angelgate”—it’s hard to say whose interests he was serving, his readers’ or his own. Or maybe he was upset not because collusion is wrong but because the group had declined to invite him and—again, not kidding—treated him rudely when he showed up anyway. He ultimately left TechCrunch after a highly publicized fight with the new owners, AOL, who dared to question this conflict of interest.

Nick Denton of Gawker is also a prolific investor in his own space, often putting money in companies founded by employees who left his company or were fired. He has stakes in several local blog networks, such as Curbed, that are often linked to or written about on his larger sites. By shuffling users around to two sites he can charge advertisers twice. Denton also invested in the site Cityfile, which he was able to pump up with traffic from his other blogs before acquiring it outright and rolling it back into Gawker.

Influence is ultimately the goal of most blogs and blog publishers, because that influence can be sold to a larger media company. But, as Arrington and Denton show, influence can also be abused for profit through strategic investments—be it in the companies they write about or where they decide to send monetizeable traffic. And, of course, these are only the conflicts of interest blatant enough to be discovered by the public. Who knows what else goes on behind the curtain?

ENTER: THE MANIPULATOR

Bloggers eager to build names and publishers eager to sell their blogs are like two crooked businessmen colluding to create interest in a bogus investment opportunity—building up buzz and clearing town before anyone gets wise. In this world, where the rules and ethics are lax, a third player can exert massive influence. Enter: the media manipulator.

The assumptions of blogging and their owners present obvious vulnerabilities that people like me exploit. They allow us to control what is in the media, because the media is too busy chasing profits to bother trying to stop us. They are not motivated to care. Their loyalty is not to their audience but to themselves and their con. While ultimately this is reason to despair, I have found one small solace: Conning the conmen is one of life’s most satisfying pleasures. And it’s not even hard.

In the next chapters I will outline how to do this and how it is being done. I have broken down the manipulation of blogs into nine effective tactics. Each exposes a pathetic vulnerability in our media system—each, when wielded properly, levels the playing field and gives you free rein to control the flow of information on the web.
IV

TACTIC #1

BLOGGERS ARE POOR; HELP PAY THEIR BILLS

The writings by which one can live are not the writings which themselves live, and are never those in which the writer does his best. . . . Those who have to support themselves by their pen must depend on literary drudgery, or at best on writings addressed to the multitude.

—JOHN STUART MILL, AUTOBIOGRAPHY
There are many ways to give someone a bribe. Very rarely does it mean handing them a stack of bills. You use this logic and the criteria that bloggers' employers use to determine the size of their paycheck—the stuff bloggers are paid for—can be co-opted and turned into an indirect bribe. These levers were easy enough for me to find, and properly identified and wielded, they turned out to be as effective as any overt payoff.

It begins with how these bloggers are hired. Put aside any notion that applicants are chosen based on skill, integrity, or a love of their craft. Ben Parr, editor at large at the popular technology blog Mashable, was once asked what he looked for when he hired writers for his blogs. His answer was one word: quickness. “Online journalism is fast-paced,” he explained. “We need people that can get the story out in minutes and can compose the bigger opinion pieces in a couple hours, not a couple of days.” As to any actual experience in journalism, that would be considered only “a definite plus.”

The payment structure of blogging reflects this emphasis on speed over other variables, such as quality, accuracy, or how informative the content might be. Early on blogs tended to pay their writers a rate per post or a flat rate with a minimum number of posts required per day. Engadget, Slashfood, Autoblog, and other sites run by Weblogs, Inc. paid bloggers a reported five hundred dollars a month in 2005 for 125 posts—or four dollars a post, four per day. Gawker paid writers twelve dollars a post as late as 2008. And of course these rates don’t include the other duties bloggers are stuck with, such editing, responding to e-mails, and writing comments. Professional blogging is done in the boiler room, and it is brutal.

Gawker set the curve for the industry again when they left the pay-per-post model and switched to a pageview-based compensation system that gave bonuses to writers based on their monthly traffic figures. These bonuses came on top of a set monthly pay, meaning that bloggers were eligible for payments that could effectively double their salary once they hit their monthly quota. You can imagine what kind of results this led to. I recall a post from a Gawker writer whining about how he didn’t know how much money he’d make that month—and getting seventeen thousand views for it.

The bonus system was so immediately rewarding for Gawker bloggers that the company tweaked their ratio to deemphasize the bonus slightly. The system remains, however, and today the company has a big board in its offices that shows the stats for all the writers and their stories. When writers aren’t fighting for bonuses, all they have to do is look up to be reminded: If you’re at the bottom of the board, you might get fired.

This is now the standard model for blogs. Forbes.com was relaunched with hundreds of blogger contributors who are paid per visitor. Seeking Alpha, a network of financial writers (arguably worth a lot to its investor-type readers), launched a payment platform in 2010 that pays writers based on the traffic their posts generate. The average payment per article turned out to be only fifty-eight dollars for the first six months. A writer needs to rack up roughly one hundred thousand views to make even one thousand dollars—a tough fight when you’re jostling for share of voice against the thousand-plus writers who publish there each month. The blog The Awl announced it would also start paying its writers using a similar model two years after its founding. A dozen or so bloggers split a small pool of revenue generated by advertisements on the site. The more traffic the site does, the larger the pool. It’s the same incentive—desperately dependent on big hits—but instead of fighting each other for pageviews, they’re all in on the hustle together.

Business Insider, run by Henry Blodget, is barely breaking even, so they don’t have much to pay their writers. Earlier experiments with highly paid, experienced journalists failed to work. When he does pay his writers, Blodget has a fairly simple rule of thumb: Writers need to generate three times the number of pageviews required to pay for their own salary and benefits, as well as a share of the overhead, sales, hosting, and Blodget’s cut. In other words, an employee making $60,000 a year needs to produce 1.8 million pageviews a month, every month, or they’re out.

This is no easy task.