

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Shock and Awe: a Reflection on Manipulation and the Media

Pallas Hupé Cotter · Wednesday, November 24th, 2021

A decade ago, when he was host of *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart was about to interview then-US president Barack Obama. Before he had a chance, Stewart abruptly stopped mid-sentence and asked the equally dignified and hip world leader to wait in the wings.

With one hand holding his earpiece, and the other held out to keep Obama at bay, Stewart claimed there was “breaking news”. The video then cut to a clip of one of those fluffy “kicker” stories that you see at the end of local newscasts. It happened to be a video of a wild-eyed contestant scarfing down an overflowing bowl of noodles at a pasta-eating contest.



The president chuckled as the newscasters pretended to laugh at the carb-loaded but nutrition-deficient news “dessert.” (Or is it desert?) I happened to be one of those newscasters.

That was a very public turning point in my TV news career (which I left behind when I left the US), but one that had been a long time coming. And while not all of us have such cringe-worthy and conspicuous moments of truth, where the ultimate way forward becomes crystal clear, we might very soon.

Right now, I have the same creeping sense of reluctant knowing-but-not-quite-ready-to-do-

something-about-it feeling about a form of media quite a lot of us rely on and some perform on: Facebook.

In October a whistle-blower who used to work at Facebook [went public](#) about how she believes the social media giant “amplifies hate, misinformation and political unrest” (both on Facebook and Instagram). Facebook denies her claims, of course. Founder Mark Zuckerberg [pointed to](#) the good that Facebook does connecting communities and loved ones. Both statements ring true for me.

When I worked in journalism, I used Facebook to connect with viewers I’d never meet in person, and learned how they felt about issues. I’ve relied on Facebook to stay in touch with faraway friends and family now that I live halfway around the world. In many ways, the social media platform’s felt like a lifeline during the pandemic. That said, it’s also driven a wedge in some significant relationships. I’ve noticed increasingly negative undertones and impacts.

I have always been deeply aware that Facebook is, at its core, a business. And one of the first lessons I learned in journalism is to follow the money. Where there’s profit involved, no matter the potential for public good, there’s also a corrosive influence: stirring emotion to grab attention for financial gain.

This is exactly what a [second Facebook whistle-blower](#) now alleges: profit is the priority for the social media giant, not integrity.

We’ve had ample reason to question Facebook before, and now have an even [clearer picture](#) of what happened at Cambridge Analytica. We know what Facebook has done with our data. And this leads me to the heart of the question I’ve been mulling: when do we know we’ve reached a tipping point? When does the harm that media (social or traditional) causes undermine its potential good?

I faced these same questions in my TV news career.

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‘It’s too easy to cast characters as heroes and villains and view the world through a black and white lens’ was the gist of my first on-air commentary for local TV news.

That was nearly thirty years ago, during the first invasion of Iraq, at the beginning of the US campaign against Saddam Hussein. I was learning the basics of the broadcasting business. And where I was then (in the Deep South) it wasn’t a generally popular view I was expressing. But I clearly remember my news director at the time laughing at the unlikeliness of a “nationalistic cowboy boot-wearing, beer-drinking audience member” even tuning in, let alone getting angry enough to act.

Flash forward to January 6, 2021, as I watched the storming of the US Capitol from my couch in New Zealand and *guess what?* (Well, in [these photos](#), I don’t see cowboy, just combat boots. But still.) And like most of us watching I wondered *how did we get to this point?*

During the twenty years I spent working in the media, I tried to find nuance in every story I covered. But going deep was often challenging. To make air, our stories had to be both visually compelling and short: between 20 seconds and three minutes. We only covered stories that made “good TV” (think moving pictures and attention-grabbing audio). We were often over-stretched and under-resourced, and our multitasking ran the risk of us getting things wrong. (I’ve written

about how this is [challenge in New Zealand](#) as well.)

We also tried to sugar-coat significance, which I've also [written about](#), and in measured ways I still believe in (especially when, Jon Stewart-style, substance is spiked with witty sarcasm).

However over my two decades in the business, I became increasingly aware of how many fear-based stories were used to attract a bigger audience.

Once I was called in early to cover breaking news about a wildfire encroaching on a neighbourhood. I delivered my updates calmly, like the iconic news anchors I idolized growing up.

During the break, my news director rushed over, pulled me aside and pressured me to, "Pick up the pace and raise your pitch." He ordered, "Add more urgency."

"But that's only going to make people anxious."

"Exactly."

I started plotting my exit from TV news in that moment.

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We don't often have crystallized moments like these that give us clarity. More often it's a slow simmer before we reach boiling point.

And complexity muddies the water. I've been pondering who's to blame for media manipulation of our emotions. Increasingly, people seem to *want* to be enraged and entertained, both on TV and on social channels. When do so many of us love to bend a narrative around what we *feel* in order to justify our beliefs? Choosing ignorance and infotainment, abandoning the power of critical thinking?

Years ago on *The Daily Show* that Stephen Colbert began skewering both the media's *and* the public's gullibility and culpability.

Colbert coined the phrase "truthiness", which he defined in an interview with the *AV Club* as: "What I say is right, and [nothing] anyone else says could possibly be true...It's not only that I *feel* it to be true, but that I *feel* it to be true. There's not only an emotional quality, but there's a selfish quality".

Since then, at least in the US, "alternative facts" have become embedded in our culture, after "we the people" were given permission by a president to pick our version of the truth.

But we can't just blame politicians for pandering to their public. It's becoming increasingly clear how middle-of-the-road local news outlets, where I dedicated decades of my life working, played a part.

And now we, as consumers and spreaders of social media messages that we might consider middle-of-the-road, may be playing a part in something with equally damaging, if unintended, global consequences.

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In the early 2000s, while working in the “top ten” Detroit TV market, I found myself arguing with an anarchist over the phone. My local news station was owned and operated by the Fox Corporation, but pursued profit by adopting a different ideology from the now infamous right-wing megaphonic national Fox News (which just celebrated its 25th anniversary). Our station was very edgy and hip, appealing to an urban audience who watched Fox programming that pushed the edge of the conservative envelope: *In Living Color*, *The Simpsons*, *Married with Children*, and *That 70s show*.

“How can you live with yourself?” the anarchist demanded, over the din of the police scanners. “Bending over for a corporation that’s a force for evil?”

He wasn’t targeting me as an individual reporter. I was just the person who’d answered the phone. He would have berated anyone in the newsroom. We were just starting to hear the conservative voices at FOX News in New York get a little louder. In response, we even-more-carefully scrutinised editorial decisions about the stories we covered, ready to fight if we felt political pressure.

I maintained an even tone as I explained this to the angry voice on the other end of the line.

“Did you see the story I did questioning the motives for the Iraq invasion? Interviewing Middle East experts about how oil fits into the equation? Asking about Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia?”

The phone call came after “Shock and Awe”, the attack on Iraq in response to 9/11. I was anchoring the news on the day of the opening salvo and was deeply unsettled about the turning-point in history that we were witnessing. I pitched a deeper story than the official line of “secret intelligence” the administration used to help justify the campaign, asking experts to evaluate other motivations for the invasion, challenging the constant stream of press releases the government was feeding news stations.

I told him, “I wasn’t just *supported*, I was encouraged to do that story.”

I was trying to challenge the anarchist. I believed in the job I was trying to do. Even if it impacted only one viewer at a time. But when I heard my argument, I could hear how weak it would sound to him. There was no denying that I was just a cog in a much bigger wheel, even if I was squeaking.

And his final point I couldn’t argue with.

“Your news product earns advertising dollars that support the FOX Corporation.”

I eventually left that station, but went on to another, owned by a more middle-of-the-road corporate giant.

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As social media users, even if we use the platforms to espouse our values (I've written about how that can **turn out** – and btw didn't choose the hot-button headline) we are all cogs in a wheel of fortune (forgive the pun, just couldn't resist).



Many young people have already stepped away from the Facebook and Instagram platforms, but it's not so easy for others. I run groups on Facebook, and connect with clients there. I know several businesses that only use social media and haven't even set up a website. It's where you can build a brand as well as a community. Anyone can set up a page for free and advertize goods and services. It's one-stop-shopping and it's easy.

While I am not a conspiracy theorist, I honestly wondered for a minute if Facebook might have pulled the plug on itself (and Instagram) in October to remind us, as individuals and more importantly as businesses, how much we rely on their feeds. Even if Facebook took a temporary hit on the stock market, it may well have been worth it. (Just sayin'.)

But with this latest picture of what some say is happening behind the scenes, is this the moment of clarity we've been waiting for? This is a question we can no longer ignore. Especially as Facebook's now focused on a new frontier: the virtual reality Metaverse.

So if time for action has come, what action should we take?

The first and easiest step is to become more aware of what we're consuming, as well as what we're sharing, and how it can be manipulated as well as how we are manipulated. In my attempt to do this, my social media feeds have become so innocuous, they're to the point of anemic. (And they don't really add up to a **real narrative** of our lives, as Adam Leipzig once pointed out).

But as the whispers turn to shouts, I realize that curating our content and activity may not be enough.

Any interacting we do with a social media giant accused of incentivizing hot-button reactions, even if we feel what we do is helpful or at least harmless, may well make us willing participants in something guaranteed to come back to bite us.

Some around the world believe, especially after the Christchurch terrorist attacks, that it already has.

The problem is, it's far more convenient just to turn our heads.

I still remember in the early 2000s grabbing a latte at a cafe when another customer waved at the images of the military operation in Iraq on the TV screen.

“Seriously. Isn't it too early for this? I haven't even had my coffee yet” he joked, weakly.

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Last year, Jon Stewart debuted a film he wrote and directed called *Irresistible*. He described it in a [New York Times article](#) as a movie about a small town political race that captures national attention and attracts big time campaign cash. Stewart said the movie illustrated how society is “incentivized for more extreme candidates, for more extreme partisanship, for more conflict and permanent campaigning, for corporate interests to have more influence on the process, not less.” And while the movie didn't do very well (it was released at the height of the pandemic) Stewart says still believes, “Ignorance is an entirely curable disease”.

He's now continuing to try and cure it with another TV show. In the first episode of *The Problem with Jon Stewart* (which just debuted on Apple TV+), Stewart jokes, “This is what I look like now...I'm not happy about it either.”

And frankly I'm not at all that happy about these topics I feel compelled to deeply ponder. This is complex territory.

But this kind of deep-diving, closely examining and questioning our choices and behavior, is what's required from all of us right now on a number of fronts.

It's the kind of [cultural conversation](#) Jon Stewart and his shows spark, and may well be why he felt compelled to return to television with his intelligent blend of journalism and comedy.

Well, maybe that *and* the money?

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