

MANIPULATED OUTRAGE



What's the Trend?

Media, data analytics, and advertising are combining forces to create a perpetual stream of noise that is intended to incite rage and illicit angry reactions on social media and in real life.

In April of 2017, Dublin-based designer Stephen Crowley made the Internet angry. His “crime” was posting images of his 18-month-old daughter, Hannah. Unlike the pictures shared by most doting dads, these images were unusual. In one, Hannah was sitting on a kitchen counter holding a long chef’s knife. In another, she seemed to be hanging from a jungle gym that was clearly too high for her.

The one that seemed to incense the Internet most was an image of Hannah hanging dangerously from the railing of their house with a one-story drop and wooden stairs beneath her. Crowley’s caption beneath the photo read simply, “I think the new stair gates may be faulty.”



Photo - Courtesy of Stephen Crowley (used with permission).

Before you start to get a little outraged yourself, there is one detail about this story that you should know. Crowley is a designer and these images were all Photoshopped to have a bit of fun and make the family smile. At the time, smiles had been hard to come by in their family because Hannah had been diagnosed with a rare immune disorder called HLH. She had spent six months in chemotherapy at the hospital before eventually receiving a bone marrow transplant. To lighten the mood, Crowley had turned to his Photoshop skills to create photos of his daughter in ridiculous situations.

The problem, if you could call it that, was that not everyone on the Internet realized they were phony. As a result, he was on the receiving end of what has rapidly become one of the most commonly expressed emotions online ... outrage. Stephen Crowley was caught off guard by all the attention and didn't intend to mislead people. His goal was a noble one: to raise awareness of the need for bone marrow donors.¹ Not everyone online shares his good intentions.

We are faced with an explosion of *Manipulated Outrage* online, through which we are encouraged to feel irritation, anger, and even repulsion by those who too often aim to profit from or exploit our emotions.

This year, Facebook admitted that their new reactions buttons had an undesirable algorithmic side effect. The more often you clicked the angry or sad reaction buttons, the more Facebook's algorithm would offer content to evoke the same emotion. In other words, the more you clicked the angry

button, the more news Facebook would show to make you angry, and the cycle would continue.

While Rage is defined as “violent, uncontrolled anger,” *outrage* is “an extremely strong reaction of anger, shock, or indignation.” Outrage, in other words, is something created when you do or say things that make others angry. When you consider how good this outrage seems to be in capturing attention, it is easy to see why it might make sense to manipulate it for the purposes of influencing people—especially when it comes to politics.

The Outrageous President

When Donald Trump first announced his candidacy for the Republican nomination for US president, many thought it was a joke. One journalist even recalls being there on the day of the announcement and chuckling at the ridiculousness of the staged event.² Two years later, Trump rode a wave of unrealistic promises and tell-it-like-it-is opinions delivered via Twitter to end up in the Oval Office.

As former Obama speechwriter Jon Favreau once described it, “Trump doesn’t care if we think he’s telling the truth—he just wants his supporters to doubt that *anyone* is telling the truth.” A key element of his strategy was his ability to manipulate outrage from his supporters and use it to his advantage. There is no need to spend time attacking other people when you can send a quickly crafted thought in less than 140 characters and get others to attack your enemies for you.

In March 2017, Trump tweeted: “How low has President Obama gone to tapp [sic] my phones during the very sacred election process. This is Nixon/Watergate. Bad (or sick) guy!” Those 140 characters launched months of probes and inquiries for a claim that most investigators concluded had no proof or validity.

The important question to ask here is: *Why does this work so well?* To answer that question, let’s look at the brilliant promotional plan for one of the worst movies of the past decade—and why so many people actually went to see it.³

The Manipulator's Playbook

In 2009, marketing consultant Ryan Holiday was tasked with creating a promotional plan for the ultimate bro film about drinking and sexual conquests, titled (after the book that inspired it) “I Hope They Serve Beer In Hell,” written by Internet personality Tucker Max.

Holiday's strategy hinged on classic reverse psychology: Get young men to see the film by telling them not to. To make the mental trickery work, he sent outraged emails to activist groups to encourage them to boycott the film on college campuses. He sent fake tips to gullible media properties like Gawker and made intentionally offensive ads to anger (mostly) female reporters and bloggers. The goal was to create so much noise that the young men who were the target audience for the film couldn't help but overhear the outrage and feel compelled to see the film because the world around them seemed to be telling them *not* to.

The campaign's signature moment was this story, which Holiday later wrote about:

“My favorite was the campaign in Chicago—the only major city where we could afford transit advertising. After placing a series of offensive ads on buses and the metro, from my office I alternated between calling in angry complaints to the Chicago CTA and sending angry emails to city officials with reporters cc'd, until ‘under pressure,’ they announced that they would be banning our advertisements and returning our money. Then we put out a press release denouncing this cowardly decision. I’ve never seen so much publicity. It was madness.”⁴

After the success of the campaign, Holiday would go on to write a bestselling book called *Trust Me, I'm Lying*, as an exposé of how easily people could be manipulated and a warning that perhaps others might use these same techniques for more evil purposes than promoting a bad film. Unfortunately, his wake-up call for the media fell largely upon deaf ears. Instead, the book became an underground playbook for those seeking to manipulate the media to spread hate and negative ideas—people like alt-right blogger Milo Yiannopoulos.

Holiday also writes that someone like Yiannopoulos “doesn’t care that you hate them—they like it. It’s proof to their followers that they are doing something subversive and meaningful. It gives their followers something to talk about. It imbues the whole movement with a sense of urgency and action—it creates purpose and meaning.”

In this easily offended world, fueling outrage can lead to credibility because it offers a fringe opinion the chance to reach the masses. The reason it works so well is because the media is a willing accomplice in this game of deception. For them, following the outrage simply makes good business sense.

The Business Model of Outrage

When you sell advertising based on clicks and views, the more attention you can get, the better. In the first full quarter since Donald Trump’s electoral victory, *The New York Times* reported its single biggest surge of subscribers in its entire history; adding more than 300,000 digital subscribers in less than a month. According to TV ratings data from Nielsen, cable news programming from Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC all saw double-digit ratings growth across the board for the second quarter of 2017. CNN had its most-watched first quarter in 14 years, and Fox News had the highest-rated quarter ever in cable news history.⁵

Clearly outrage is attracting attention, but it doesn’t just sell when it comes to mainstream media. The business model for documentary films has also long relied on *Manipulated Outrage* to expose injustices while taking on social issues. Filmmaker Louie Psihoyos, for example, used outrage as a way to engage viewers when he created the Oscar-winning film *The Cove* (2010), which is about the secret slaughter of dolphins in a Japanese seaside town.

Another example of *Manipulated Outrage* from China involves a growing legion of enterprising people who have developed a creative way to monetize outrage by scouring the shelves of Chinese supermarkets. These so called, food vigilantes are looking for products with incomplete nutritional information, food being sold past their expiration date, or products with illegal additives. When they find what they are looking for, they sue, and either win

compensation or settle out of court for undisclosed amounts.

Thanks to a strengthened version of the Chinese Food Safety Law introduced in 2015, this cottage industry of vigilante informers has exploded. One Beijing court estimates that 80% of the food-safety related cases are filed by these “professional complainers.” They win by specializing in threatening to publicize these details food manufacturers would rather keep quiet while relying on the predictable consumer outrage to provide enough motivation for these companies to settle in court as quickly as possible.⁶

The impact of all this business focus on outrage is that it creates an atmosphere where many people start to feel a social pressure to live up to their new moral duty to remain outraged at all times. Outrage has become a part of who we are.

Outrage As Identity

Teen Vogue magazine has become one of the most influential magazines among young women thanks to the transformation it has undergone under the leadership of Elaine Welteroth over the past two years.⁷

Championing the not-so-revolutionary idea that women can be interested in both fashion *and* politics, Welteroth has crafted an editorial mission that offers *Teen Vogue* readers a combination of clarity, rigor, and insight, delivered in a format that makes it easier to consume without dumbing down the issues. Rather than only covering superficial topics like makeup, clothing, and boys, the magazine goes further to encourage its readers to think about what it means to be an educated citizen.

One consistent theme since Donald Trump took office is how to channel outrage to inspire political change. In one issue, for example, there were multiple stories about how to stand up and have a voice, get involved in politics, and be heard. There was even a *Mad Libs*-style word game where readers could insert their own resistance-themed words. The assumption underlying the editorial seemed to be that it had become the duty of *woke* young women to lead the charge to fight back. For many of them, this constant need to #resist

can become a misguided directive to live a more one-sided life where there is only a single way to think.⁸

The Burden of Outrage

Author Nicholas Carr writes about how the Internet and technology is changing our brains. He famously asks whether Google might be making us all stupid by providing instant answers to everything and robbing us of the opportunity to discover knowledge by ourselves.

In a recent article about the rise of fake news, he shared a scary modern truth: “It’s possible to be both *more* informed and *more* narrow-minded.”⁹

What happens in a world where it is easy to dismiss anyone who disagrees as an idiot, unworthy of conversation? In a 2017 interview with *Pacific Standard* magazine, left-leaning political strategist and frequent CNN panelist Van Jones also asks this question—and is unafraid to cast blame in an unexpected direction:

“These young people are the worst because they will call you a bigot for not believing something that they had never heard of three months ago. So with that level of arrogance and lack of understanding, the blowback is not only inevitable, but you’ll actually accelerate it.”

When you think about the trend of *Manipulated Outrage*, it is easy to see young people as the open-minded heroes who are fighting back against those who dismiss their forward-thinking view of the world. Less often do we consider the downside of this overblown sense of righteousness and how it might make anyone just as closed-minded as the people they criticize.

The missing link is empathy and a willingness to engage from a place of kindness with those who disagree with you:

“What’s missing? ... that spirit of Mandela that says, even though I am oppressed, my view of the perfect society has a place of dignity for you in it. ... I’m not fighting against you, I’m fighting for you, because I want you to have a place of honor that doesn’t require you

to indulge in hatreds that are beneath you and your family.”¹⁰

If there is any way to conquer the polarizing effects of this *Manipulated Outrage*, it is to follow this path of Mandela and find common ground with people unlike ourselves. This starts with being willing to face each other in a conversation and stop letting those who profit from the outrage divide us so easily.

Why It Matters

We are surrounded by outrage, and are increasingly manipulated by people or organizations with ulterior motives who seek to profit from this emotion. While dishonest people will always exist, this trend also challenges each of us to be more intentional about our media diet and take a harder look at how we consume, share, and filter the information that forms our opinions.

For businesses, understanding how this *Manipulated Outrage* works can help them understand what customers are seeing and feeling. This knowledge, in turn, can help you make your messages more relevant, less sensationalist, and more believable.

How to Use This Trend

- ✓ **Create moments of “media escapism.”** We all need time away from media-inflicted outrage to do things that are less political or polarizing. NPR writer and “Pop Culture Happy Hour” host Linda Holmes likens this situation to the one from the film *The Martian*, where Matt Damon plays an astronaut stranded on Mars who needs to grow potatoes to stay alive long enough to be rescued. Her analogy is that sometimes you need to do the small things (like growing potatoes) to have the energy to tackle the big things.¹¹
- ✓ **Engage the manipulators.** In writing about the manipulation playbook, Ryan Holiday also offered the solution to fight back—engagement. Instead of banning them from speaking and offering them the moral high ground to complain about their voices being stifled, we can each

engage with their arguments and force them to defend that point of view through logic and reality. In most cases, this is where the outrage breaks down. It is harder to be manipulated once you dig beyond the sensational headlines.