

Ryan Holiday: Trust Me, I'm Lying: Confessions of a Media Manipulator¹

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The “dark handbook” of media manipulation published by Portfolio Hardcover was authored by “digital native” public relations specialist, marketer, and media strategist Ryan Holiday. Born on 16 June 1987, in Sacramento, California, Holiday – the inspiring symbol of living life on your own terms and making a living out of it – began his professional career at the age of 19, after dropping out of high school. *Trust Me, I'm Lying* (2012) is the first of his four practical books published so far: *The Obstacle Is the Way* (2014), *Ego Is the Enemy* (2016), and *The Daily Stoic* (2016). The first edition was published on 19 July 2012 in New York and soon became a bestseller mentioned by the Wall Street Journal, The Huffington Post, AdAge, The Columbia Journalism Review, Forbes, The New York Times, TechCrunch, The Times-Picayune, Fast Company, The Next Web, and Boing Boing. The second edition² that is being reviewed here was released in 2015 and provides case studies to support the authors' arguments outlined in the book.

This contemporary genius and thought-provoking book about the dawn of online publishing is a “must read” for all media and public relations students and practising professionals. “When intelligent people read, they ask themselves a simple question: What do I plan to do with this information? Most readers have abandoned even pretending to consider this” (2015: 234). Due to its simple language and explicit vocabulary, basically anyone can understand its content that is split into bite-sized portions that can be read “on the go”: “Influence is ultimately the goal of most blogs and blog publishers, because that influence can be sold to a larger media company” (2015: 38).

While working for *American Apparel* and *Tucker Max*, the young hustler and later “whistleblower” observed the working of the mass-media system affected

1 First edition: Portfolio/Penguin, United States, 2012, ISBN 978-159-184-553-9.

2 Second edition: Amazon Books, United States, 2015, ISBN 978-159-184-553-9.

by the new medium, the Internet, and developed various techniques to abuse it for gaining profit.

The first step in solving a problem is recognizing that there is actually a problem. *Trust Me, I'm Lying* is not just a confession but the honest voice of a professional media insider, confirming there is a problem with our new media system – referred to as “the monster” –, and it is in everyone’s interest to recognize this:

You cannot have your news instantly and have it done well. You cannot have your news reduced to 140 characters or less without losing large parts of it. You cannot manipulate the news but not expect it to be manipulated against you. You cannot have your news for free; you can only obscure the costs. If as a culture we can learn this lesson, and if we can learn to love the hard work, we will save ourselves much trouble and collateral damage. We must remember: There is no easy way. (2015: 68)

The work is divided into two main themes: a detailed explanation of how the media system works in practice, while the second topic highlights the consequences of such practices. In the chase for profit, average citizens are misguided, given a sensational display rather than a critical viewpoint through which personal and corporate reputations are irreversibly damaged, and history is shaped by enthusiastic opportunists and spin doctors. “In an age of images and entertainment, in an age of instant emotional gratification, we neither seek nor want honesty or reality. Reality is complicated. Reality is boring. We are incapable or unwilling to handle its confusion” (2015: 201).

The first chapter serves as a manual full of tactics on how to “feed the monster” and abuse this system, but do not stop reading just yet! Journalism today is based on ten principles as follows: verification, objectivity, originality, completeness, transparency, fairness, restraint, humanity, accountability, and empowerment. Blogs make the news but ignore these principles, products of several years’ experience, and tradition. According to the author, the Internet and its paths are still new, and it takes a bit of time to catch up with such technical development. Anyone can turn something artificial into something seemingly real through the “trading it up the chain” technique, which is highlighted in this chapter. Bloggers are attracted to scoops, stories that generate traffic, which generates profit. By acknowledging this, it is easy to figure out how to create appealing pitches that generate publicity for your subject of choice; do not worry if you do not have any supporting evidence to reference, names are just as good for backing up a story.

We get a fairly accurate picture on how online journalism works, a new sector that provides a job for most journalists in the United States. Besides informing, news are also a source of entertainment and have a high impact on our everyday lives:

In 1948, long before the louder, faster, and busier world of Twitter and social media, Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton wrote: The interested and informed citizen can congratulate himself on his lofty state of interest and information and neglect to see that he has abstained from decision and action. In short, he takes his secondary contact with the world of political reality, his reading and listening and thinking, as a vicarious performance.... He is concerned. He is informed. And he has all sorts of ideas as to what should be done. But, after he has gotten through his dinner and after he has listened to his favored radio programs and after he has read his second newspaper of the day, it is really time for bed. This is the exact reaction that web content is designed to produce. To keep you so caught up and consumed with the bubble that you don't even realize you're in one. (2015: 87)

Bloggers are citizen journalists who make a living out of page views. They work in a fast-paced environment, writing about hot topics that will generate high traffic. Due to the lack of time, these blogs often publish unverified information from all kinds of sources. Most newspapers have online versions, and the journalists have had to adapt to the fast-paced news environment, so they often take on trending stories from blogs without checking their credibility.

The second part of the book reveals that these techniques were only being shared with the purpose of educating the outsider. We also get guidelines on how to spot fake news. Crowd sourcing is a new tool used in journalism, which came along with the widespread of social media, and we get a detailed overview of its risks in this work. After the conclusions that can be put to use on a daily basis for those who follow the news, we get an interesting collection of case studies which were mentioned in earlier chapters. In the realm of blogs, there is nothing wrong with being wrong! Due to the fast nature of the medium, stories are supposed to be incomplete and are completed over time. Corrections, if any, usually show up at the bottom of the page hours or days after most people have read through it, and it has already been picked up by several other mediums, which is why it is so damaging to the reputation. It does not really matter if the person or organization communicated with the media at this point; in fact, it is better if they do not react at all!

Media manipulators are well-trained and highly-skilled professionals; they do not mind being caught red-handed because this helps their work. The public gets a massive dose of entertainment; so, blinded by their emotions, they forget to ask questions. In this realm, facts are optional and often biased. Blogs offer an online arena, where public humiliation and degradation takes place for entertainment, and anyone can become the next victim. Ryan Holiday's *Trust Me, I'm Lying* is a highly educative and useful read not just because it highlights

the danger of our trading “citizen-journalism”-based media culture but because it also offers ideas on how to oversee manipulation and find meaning in our lives, which is every intellectual person’s responsibility.