

## Soap star in terrorist social media sex conspiracy scandal

by Marian Salzman  
Jan. 17, 2017



**News consumers are increasingly inclined to pay attention to sensationalist items that stir up sensations of fear, outrage, frustration and anger, writes the CEO of Havas PR North America.**

You're a discerning reader of a serious newspaper, so the spoof headline of this article probably didn't fool you for a second. Or at least it didn't fool the rational part of your mind that you're aware of. But if someone in a white coat wearing glasses had been scanning your brain as you read the words, you would have seen your skull "lighting up"—for at least a moment or two. All those eye-catching words jammed together in the headline of this article stand out like a sore thumb in this mostly sober environment where facts and measured arguments apparently rule. We can't stop ourselves from reacting to information that looks like it might be sensational, which is why attention-grabbing tricks have become increasingly common across the whole media landscape.

Nowadays it's not just the tabloids that try to hook you in with inflammatory words and ideas. All news editors with a feel for their audience know which buttons to push to get attention—and those buttons are primarily located on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Facebook's user base for Q3 of 2016 was a staggering 1.79 billion active monthly users, even as it has been forced on its heels for its role as a primary propagator of incendiary fake news. All the way up the social hierarchy, news consumers are increasingly inclined to pay attention to sensationalist items that stir up sensations of fear, outrage,

frustration and anger.

With the unexpected success of Brexit in the UK and Donald Trump in the US, we have witnessed the power of loud (even lying) voices to tap, express and manipulate these feelings and then foment and coalesce audiences online. Even though a diversity and plurality of insights and opinions is only a click away, nobody is listening to anyone with a different POV. In the digital media ecosystem, ruthless sensationalism consistently outcompetes moderation and nuance. Of course, this is only a problem for those who lose. For the winners, it is the power of people coming together to effect change. (One of those winners—and a big one—is conservative American news site Breitbart News: The Trump campaign was steeped in its communications strategy and messaging, and now the administration will be, too.)

Because PR must be the most agile of the communications practices, and because it's essential for me to get the right sort of attention for my clients and for my company, I'm constantly on my digital devices keeping track of how news and technology are impacting business and life. As an early tech adopter and trendspotter, I'm thinking a lot about digital addiction these days and how it certainly won't serve to make our echo chambers or bubbles any less powerful or entrenched. For many, there is a sense of being sucked into our screens in ways that have all the empty, repetitive twitchiness of addiction. The fact that more of us share a deepening sense of unease about tablets and smartphones serves as an important side note to whether or not we can trust what we're reading on them.

Though the outlets for sensationalism have changed—and grown all the more intoxicating—it's nothing new. In the 20th century, news hounds were schooled in yellow journalism and its hard-nosed maxims of "sex sells" and "if it bleeds, it leads." But like pre-digital "adult content," the sensationalism of pre-internet times pales by comparison with what's now online. Now people who identify as serious and discerning don't need to be ashamed to carry around a copy of *Us Weekly*. They—you—just have to click on links for a quick hit of something sensational. Nobody will know whether you're looking at an in-depth analysis of economic policy, graphic coverage of a terrorist attack, an update on Kim and Kanye, or another kitten video.

Or rather, nobody in the physical world around you knows what you're eyeballing. But the site owners serving it up know exactly what you're looking at and for how long. The technology gives them real-time feedback on what attracts attention, and they can tweak it in real time to experiment with what can make it even more attractive. They are engaged in what Silicon Valley design thinker, philosopher and entrepreneur Tristan Harris has called "a race to the bottom of the brain stem." In other words, they're competing to find

whatever it takes to create even more compelling stimulation that attracts and holds attention.

Will more brands, businesses, organizations and societies part ways with truth and restraint just because everyone else seems to be? Their ability to recognize the big picture and to respond wisely—not with the bottom of their brain stems with just short-term goals in mind—will help write the future headlines for all of us.