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## Winning the Battle of the Story: Information and Narrative Warfare as Activism

*AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN SELLERS, ACTIVIST, DIRECTOR AND  
CO-FOUNDER OF OTHER98, AND PRESIDENT OF THE RUCKUS SOCIETY*

*TARA LOCKHART AND JOHN SELLERS*

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*A prominent veteran activist discusses leveraging technology for progressive, anti-capitalist information sharing and dominant narrative disruption, focusing on the use of memes, viral content, and understanding of algorithmic literacy, all within a platform built natively for Facebook.*

Tara Lockhart: Welcome, John Sellers. Let's begin by telling us a bit about who you are, what you do, and how you encounter misinformation and disinformation.

John Sellers: I am a professional activist and have been a professional activist for 25 years. I've worked on a lot of different issues around climate and human rights, economic justice, some racial justice and anti-patriarchal stuff; I would describe myself as a democratic socialist and an anti-capitalist.

I direct an organization right now called Other98 (<https://other98.com/>). I am also the president of another non-profit organization (NGO) called The Ruckus Society (<https://ruckus.org/>). I encounter quite a lot of misinformation and disinformation in the line of work that I'm in because I work quite a lot in social media and narrative intervention—what I sometimes call meme warfare. One of the tag lines of Other98 is “keeping the class war classy.”

We in some ways started off as a media company called agit-pop communications: popular agitation. We define ourselves as a renegade communications firm, or what Adbusters would call a subvertising agency, using the kind of tools refined by the advertising industry to challenge the corporate dominance of the story sphere. Given this work, I see a lot of mis/disinformation, but I guess we'd have to define misinformation and disinformation, right?

Lockhart. Yes, what's the difference you see between those two?

Sellers: Well, I feel like misinformation is just a mistake and disinformation is intentional, kind of an information warfare tactic. Disinformation is where you're trying to manipulate the facts and get the facts to fit a narrative that's going to serve your ends. I think Winston Churchill famously said at Potsdam something like, "gentlemen, history will shine favorably upon us because I intend to write it." The dominant narrative has always been written by the victors and the conquerors.

This means we get a dominant narrative in the United States of Columbus discovering America, which is, I would say, disinformation, not misinformation. And it's a powerful meme that's been created, right? It reinforces itself every Columbus Day; it's in children's history books. It's a made-up story that is now seen as fact. This stuff has been happening forever. In the world of social media, and in the world of the twenty-four-hour news cycle, and in the world of Trump where everything's ten times as fast as it was three years ago—when it was already too fast—there's just this tremendous mediascape full of misinformation and disinformation.



Figure 1. Columbus “Nice Nation” Meme (courtesy of Other98).

Lockhart: In talking about meme warfare, can you talk more about narrative intervention? Can you describe that for me?

Sellers: Sure. For example, Other98 did a bunch of narrative intervention against the Kavanaugh nomination to the Supreme Court. In this example, it consists of taking what the Republicans want the dominant narrative to be and doing battle with that in the social media space, trying to win the battle of the story about who Kavanaugh is and what he represents. One aim is to show that he's in a long line of patriarchal leadership that we're just supposed to shut up and be happy with.

Other98 conducts a lot of meme warfare because we have a massive social media following on Facebook, where the newsfeed, in many ways, is dominated by memes. We helped to sort of invent and reinforce what the Facebook newsfeed *is*; we are a platform that is native to Facebook. We've built our entire media enterprise on Facebook, and we've created a bunch of the stickiest content that Facebook has ever published. We get some reward in the algorithm because we're creating the most viral content that's in the algorithm. Our content is so viral that Facebook won't let us boost it with paid advertising like you can boost other videos or stories. You can't boost memes in Facebook because Facebook recognizes just how powerful they are and how, if you started boosting stuff that is that organically viral in its reach already, it would just burn the system down.

Lockhart: No meme boosting on Facebook. I didn't know that.

Sellers: That's right. Some other narrative interventions we've organized include a big narrative intervention with the Patriotic Millionaires against the Trump Tax Plan, which was in many ways a narrative intervention against the incredibly powerful meme of trickle-down economics, which has been the dominant meme of how economics works in the United States since the Reagan administration. The majority of Americans have believed for forty years now that if we give more money to rich people, if we give rich people tax breaks, if we give them incentives, if we give them corporate welfare, the money will trickle down to all of us, and the rising tide will lift all boats. And that couldn't be further from the truth. We're out to intervene with that narrative, to undermine the credibility of that narrative, and to create more powerful narratives: to win the battle of the story.

Lockhart: Yes, I like that language around narrative a lot. I feel like this will really resonate with English teachers, rhetoricians, people who've studied narrative and the like, who have never heard that exact language used around co-opting advertising and narrative strategies to flip the script. That makes me curious as to whether anyone has ever accused Other98 of spreading misinformation or disinformation, would you say?

Sellers: We've certainly been accused of it. In fact, we've been accused of it by institutions that are seen as the arbiters of truth online, such as PolitiFact. PolitiFact has published a number of take-downs on Other98 that I would say are disinformation. For example, we created a very popular viral meme right at the beginning of the Trump presidency. Bernie Sanders called for a vote on legalizing the importing of medicine from Canada, and we published a meme that listed the nine or ten dem-

ocratic senators who voted against it.



Figure 2. Democrats and Big Pharma Meme (courtesy of Other98).

At the top of that list was Cory Booker, who's really in the pocket of Wall Street and pharma; I mean, he's from New Jersey, one of the most powerful pharma states in the United States. This meme went viral. It was a huge embarrassment in terms of exposing Corey. And really quickly, PolitiFact published a story that they never contacted us for. They spoke with Cory Booker's chief of staff—it sounded like it was written by Cory Booker's chief of staff—rating our meme to be “mostly false,” but if you read the actual piece, it's clear that our meme is almost entirely true, and they're just kind of nibbling around the edges of it and debating minutia.

They did it to us again with one of our most viral memes ever about how the Trump Tax Plan blew a trillion-dollar hole in the deficit. PolitiFact let an eighteen-year-old intern—who writes on her Facebook page that her name is pronounced “Ronald Reagan”—this eighteen-year-old intern who's never studied journalism in college got to write this incredible takedown of Other98 and this meme. However, if you look at all the media zeitgeist around the Trump tax cuts, it is just accepted fact that those cuts blew a trillion-dollar hole in the deficit that will likely lead us to have to borrow a bunch of money from China. It's scary for us because Facebook literally uses PolitiFact as one of its arbiters to decide whether different platforms are publishing fake news, and so we're getting real-deal strikes against us on the platform that we built ourselves to be on: we don't exist really anywhere else.

When we get a strike against us from PolitiFact, we don't know exactly what that means, but we've definitely tangled with Facebook on lots of different levels and had different admins of ours banned for three days, five days, thirty days and all kinds of stuff, because we're pushing the envelope. It's great that we can reach five to ten million people a day with our feed and fifteen million people a day with historic events like the Kavanaugh nomination or hearings, but it's also painful because we don't control our own destiny; we're on someone else's platform.

Lockhart: There are a lot of arguments or somewhat naive critiques about the way that social media is at the heart of misinformation and disinformation, without thinking about the larger situation of digital environments, the algorithms that create the way that information is circulated, or the way that bots can participate in that amplification to circulate information more quickly so things can kind of blow up. This is so interesting to hear from you about the ways that these tools or realities can be used on the other side to counter mis- or disinformation as well. Most academics aren't writing from that position of trying to reach ten million subscribers a day with a meme that is going viral or pushing the envelope a little bit in terms of what Facebook will allow.

Sellers: What the algorithm loves is viral material. Right? That's in many ways how Trump beat Hillary; he had much more viral material. He spends on Facebook like nobody else does because he knows that everyone is there and everyone's getting their news there. Because he is starting with material or content that is so much more viral, he's getting so much more for his money. It's helpful to think about paid advertising on Facebook in these terms. When I start with a video that I know has already gone viral—already demonstrated that it can burn down the algorithm—when I boost that through advertising, it goes nuts. When you add in the fact that Trump isn't bound by truth, this means that he can really create titillating and viral stories, saying, for instance, that Hillary was kidnapping kids and holding them in the basement of a pizzeria.

But what Hillary and the Democrats did was they started with just crap content, or meh content, and then they spent lots of money trying to make that do something on Facebook, but because it was crap to begin with, it couldn't match how Trump was getting way more traction for his money and getting much crazier reach. Facebook also measures messaging on an affinity rating of one to ten to track how deeply the audience connects with the material. In 2016, Trump just beat [Clinton] on every single front: how much reach he got, how much affinity the audience had to his messaging, all that stuff.

I think there's been this incredible awakening since the 2016 election of the power of social media. What Democrats have by and large done is complain that Republicans are beating us unfairly and so we're going to leave Facebook in protest. They've done this instead of staying where most people are getting their news and learning how to fight and win on those platforms; using the master's tools to tear down the master's house. That's a bastardization of what Audre Lorde says—she says you can't use the master's tools to tear down the master's house—but that's the struggle we are grappling with

right now.

For our ends, I do like to use all the advertising tricks that have been used for hundreds of years to imprint on people. They say that American kids can recognize way more corporate logos now than they can recognize species, meaning plants or animals. These are really powerful tools that create reality. We live in a reality that is created by the stories that hold that reality up. When I think about starting out as an activist, I was all about direct action: chaining myself to something, or climbing a giant building, or getting in front of an oil tanker. It was all about challenging authority. I think with meme warfare and the stuff that I'm doing now with Other98, it's more about challenging reality. What kind of reality do we want to live in? Do we want to live in a reality where the only economic operating system for democracy is capitalism? I don't think that's the only choice we have. I think you can have democracy without unbridled corporate capitalism. In this point in my activism, then, I'm battling for mindspace. And for the dominant narrative of what reality can be.

Lockhart: I want to pick up on some of the advertising or rhetorical strategies that you might use, as a way to highlight what both teachers and students need to be thinking about in terms of how people are crafting those stories and those realities. Can you give me some examples of the advertising strategies you would use to imprint?

Sellers: I haven't read a bunch of books on advertising strategies; I've just grown up as an American kid marinated in ads. I think that with the kind of stuff that we do, we're very quick to hit; we operate at the speed of the news cycles. It's such a fast cycle that whoever wins the narrative battle at the beginning often wins the ultimate outcome of something.

The strategic principles would be along the lines of creating stuff that's simple. That's memorable. That's edgy. That tells a good story. A lot of people think that a meme just has an outrageous fact in it; there are whole departments within NGOs now and a whole consultant class who are making social media assets while not really understanding the DNA of a meme. They might make something that looks like a meme: it's square, it has a pretty picture in it, it has an outrageous fact. But it doesn't draw people in; it doesn't make them want to share it. It doesn't have an editorial voice. It doesn't tell a story; it just tells a fact. To be a great meme, you have to have both something that you're saying and be able to tell a story. You need to have an editorial point of view, a perspective; your meme needs to give people something to resonate with.

A couple more things about advertising. Both the pleasure and the pain of Facebook is the way that Facebook ate the Internet in the last ten years. It's where most people now hang out and decide things. Of course, kids are thumbing their nose at it and moving to Instagram or WhatsApp or something else. That doesn't change the fact that a billion people are on Facebook every day.

In that way, Facebook has allowed us to have a huge reach: we've been able to use our content and

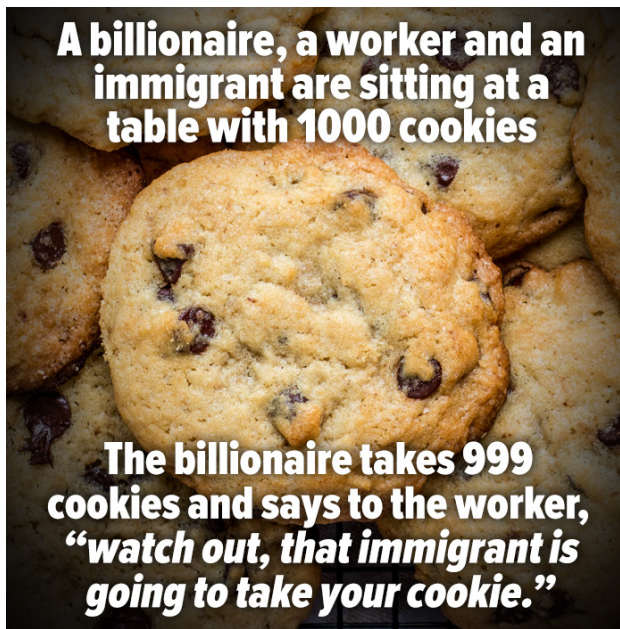


Figure 3. Tax the Rich/Share the Cookies Meme (courtesy of Other98).

how sticky and viral our content is to build an audience. That is like having a broadcast or corporate channel at scale: we reach more people on Facebook than any other Facebook page in the news sphere, except for Fox. Fox posts way more often than we do, so in terms of a post-by-post basis, they can't even come close to us. That allows us to reach people whom only corporations with access to a TV budget could reach before.

Lockhart: It gives you the means of production.

Sellers: Yes, in two ways actually. We can create amazing content: amazing video, polished sexy stuff that ordinary people could never have produced thirty years ago without having access to a TV station or a crazy advertising budget. Computers and the digital world have leveled the playing field.

Lockhart: Yes, which was the promise of the digital world.

Sellers: There's the fight to take it away, the net neutrality debates, and the like. I mean, just like corporations stole the radio airwaves first, and then the TV air waves, and privatized them in order to control them, I think they're trying to do the same thing with the Internet. That's why it's really nerve-wracking to have your media platform in the garden of one of the richest guys on Earth.

Lockhart: This brings us to your perspective on the kinds of literacy, reading, writing, critical thinking, contextualizing, researching—all of those skills that people need in this environment. For ex-

ample, how can people look at something that Other98 created, then look at PolitiFact's critique of that content, and assess that? How can they see what's coming across their feed and decide what is meaningful and what stories to believe? How can they poke holes in the reality that they see in front of them?

Sellers: I think it's important to have your touchstone media sites that you trust, that you've spent time reading and sourcing and reinforcing. Obviously, you can Google stuff, but it's important to realize that that search doesn't return truth. We have to do the hard work of just digging into something, thinking about it thoughtfully, thinking about it critically. As an example, I think if you've been following Cory Booker's career—you know something about how he's voted on a whole bunch of different issues, you know where he gets his money—then when you encounter our meme, you know that that meme is true. We've seen, since publishing that meme, we've seen Cory Booker really change his behavior. He came out last year saying that he wouldn't take any money from pharma anymore because of the "appearance of impropriety."

Even if you have touchstone media sites that you trust, though, it's important to maintain the fortitude to dig more deeply and make fact-based decisions. Many Americans think that corporate media contains the whole spectrum of information, but from MSNBC to CNN to Fox, all corporate media necessarily has a *corporate* bias, meaning those networks won't critique the hegemony of capitalism. That's important to realize. There's a parallel in social media in terms of algorithms: many folks believe that the black box of the Facebook algorithm generates truth. Understanding, instead, that the algorithm is momentum-based is crucial to understanding that "over-performing" posts are prioritized and are thus able to speak to larger and larger groups of people.

We saw powerful examples of this in the crazy days around both the 2016 election and the Kavanaugh hearings. There's a cultural quickening resulting from everyone running to the Internet to follow the story and figure out what to think. The Internet swells with traffic, creating the zeitgeist wave of the day. Everyone's jumping into this wave. But if you have a *new* take on the zeitgeist, the Internet rewards that. What this means for citizens is that they need to take what's emerging with a grain of salt; they need to be informed, literate consumers who can persist through the constant battle for narrative supremacy. What it means for those creating content is to intentionally learn from these zeitgeist moments about what works so that we can better participate in the next zeitgeist wave—or, even better, be driving the story before the next wave crashes.





Figure 4. I Still Believe Her Meme (courtesy of Other98).

Lockhart: Right. I like the way you're thinking about our current climate from both the production and reception sides. Are there other qualities you've been noticing about the climate in our society over the last few years that have affected the way you think or feel about your work?

Sellers: Well, I've been a socialist for about 34 years now, and from that point of view, I think there's never been a better time to critique capitalism! We've spent decades trying to build skepticism of corporate media and to have alternative platforms to challenge dominant narratives, and that is happening. In terms of that, I feel excited and hopeful; it's good for democracy and good for the US to have that diversity.

Lockhart: I'd love to hear a bit more about that excitement. What specifically do you think this helps to address?

Sellers: I think it helps shake up some of the divides in our country, which I see as not left of the aisle/right of the aisle divides, but divisions between the top and bottom. What I saw in the 2016 election was the Democratic party's failed blocking of progressive messages—those messages still got through and resonated even though Democrats were focused on not rocking the economic boat. Democrats ended up discounting the millennial movement in 2016 by putting their thumbs on the scale. I think the result of those actions coming to light was that a lot of people woke up. People don't want to contest the center anymore; they want something really different. This makes me hopeful that we might get to something like Medicare for all in 2020, 2022, 2024.

On the other hand, in terms of things to worry about, I think about climate change. In this country we've always had virulent anti-science or anti-truth factions for hundreds of years; sometimes we call them creationists. Some of those populations are mobilized more now, which helps them grow their movement. One common mistake, often made by scientists, is to think that facts will save us: to think we can win the debate of truth with science. When we dominated the Internet with our meme about the TransMountain Pipeline, some scientists got caught up arguing about what kinds of specific distillates would make pipelines blow up in this case or that case. That's not the point of the meme. Meme warfare isn't scientific debate: it's a different tool for a different purpose. In the case of stopping the TransMountain Pipeline, scientific debate, at that moment, is the wrong weapon.

Lockhart: Last question, and it has to do with schooling. I'm keen to hear your answers since I know both of your teenagers have been unschooled their whole lives and that has been something your family has really valued (and your kids are amazing). I might be able to anticipate your answer a bit here, but I'd love to hear it in your words. What do you think schooling can do to help individuals develop the strategies they need to counter mis- and disinformation?

Sellers: One obvious answer is to offer more classes, or lessons throughout the curriculum, on media literacy. Just thinking of some of the examples I've given above, students probably need a unit on memes that helps them practice critically understanding memes from the inside out—not just in terms of “getting” them but also producing them. Thinking of our cultural history and context, how do the stories students are taught about Columbus function as memes? What would those memes look like? What about incredibly powerful memes like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter? This kind of work helps students understand both the dominant stories that circulate in our culture and create our reality, as well as how those stories can be challenged.

The bigger point of your question and my answer, though, is I think about creativity and freedom. If this is how we want students to think, there needs to be less teaching to the test—less obedience, less standardization, less focus on “the answer”—and more enhancement of creativity, awareness of multiple stories or perspectives, critique. Students should have the freedom to define different answers, and even challenge the premises, or the questions. That's how we get to a modern, literate populous.