

Episode 9. A troubling business ethics issue. Potemkin terrorism, or How the information industry is playing us.

Welcome to philosophy for the real world. This is Professor Thomas White. In Episode 3, I explained that no matter where we get our news and information—almost without exception—we’re told that we’re a nation sharply, perhaps *fatally* divided in two. We aren’t fellow citizens or neighbors, we’re enemies.

The problem with this claim, however, is that it’s *false*. As I explained in that episode, the majority of Americans (60 to 80%) agree on the so-called divisive issues. On immigration, abortion, marriage equality, trust in science, stricter gun laws, addressing climate change, Obamacare—most Americans support what can reasonably be labeled liberal or progressive attitudes.

So, why do people believe the false *two warring tribes* narrative? As I also explained in that episode, it’s because *that’s* the narrative the entire news/information/opinion industry pushes—and they do so because they’re businesses. They’re businesses whose primary mission is to make money. They’re not public service organizations with a mission to inform the public. And, in the last 20 years, this industry discovered that even if the *two warring tribes* narrative is *false*, it is more profitable than something more accurate, but less dramatic.

So, that's why those companies do that.

But there's another part of this issue that's important to understand. How are these businesses able to be so successful? Humans are supposed to be intelligent. In theory, it should be impossible to deceive hundreds of millions of people. Yet these companies do just that. How do they manage it?

The answer? Potemkin terrorism.

Potemkin terrorism and the brain: the amygdala.

To understand *Potemkin terrorism*, we first need to talk about the amygdala. That's the part of the brain responsible for such emotions as fear, anxiety, and aggression. From an evolutionary standpoint, this is an older part of the brain—one we share with many other mammals. Its job is *to keep us alive* by spurring us to take appropriate action when we're threatened. Classic examples of the amygdala in action are making us *hypervigilant and apprehensive in problematic situations* and *triggering a "fight or flight" response*.

This is simply how humans are hard-wired. When we're in environments that contain real or imagined threats, we're on edge. The brain actively monitors the situation, and the amygdala keeps us primed to respond if any danger appears.

Think about what you're like in that state. Imagine it's evening and you're walking along an unfamiliar, dark, wooded path. Things probably feel potentially unsafe. You're alert to everything around you. You're anxious, on edge, and maybe afraid. You're ready to react to something that might threaten you. That's the amygdala doing its job.

However, the amygdala can be so effective that it can make us act even *before* we have a chance to think about and evaluate a potentially dangerous situation. Imagine again you're walking along that dark path and, all at once, a branch falls on your head. Most likely you'd be so startled and frightened that your heart would race, adrenaline would surge, and you'd take off in a panicky sprint. What you *wouldn't* do is pause, calmly examine the situation, and say, "Hmmm. Let's see what just fell on me. Was that a harmless branch or a deadly snake?" No. You would just run.

What happened when you got startled and ran is called an "amygdala hijack." Your amygdala made the decision for you ("This may or may not be a danger, but we're not taking any chances") and gave your body an order ("RUN!").

Monetizing the amygdala.

Now imagine that you could find a way to use that process *to make money*. You'd start by getting people to rely on your company to determine whether their environment was safe or not. But you'd tell them that they're in danger *virtually all the time*—and they need to check back *with you* frequently to know *what* they should be afraid of and *how* to protect themselves. And the more they checked in and read about potential threats, the more money you'd make.

Obviously, I'm describing the business practice of virtually every news/information/opinion and social media company and website. Remember, these are not nonprofit organizations performing a public service. They're for-profit businesses whose CEOs' annual compensation is in the tens of millions of dollars. These firms' profits come from advertising and subscription revenue, so the more viewers and clicks, the higher the profit. And because their main mission is *making money*, their "brand" isn't, "Come to us for objective information." It's "You are surrounded by enemies who hate everything you stand for and want to destroy you. They are coming for you! There are secret and dangerous conspiracies everywhere! Come to us to find out what your enemies are up to and how to protect yourself."

Now, the problem these companies face in getting and keeping an audience is that their description of the world is *false*. Granted, there are bad people and genuine threats in the world. We *do* have serious disagreements with other people in

our society about important issues. However, we are not surrounded by enemies. The people around us are our *neighbors* who are ready to help each other. Take a moment to do an internet search on “people who risked their lives to help others.” You’ll be astonished at what you find. Every day people put themselves in danger to help strangers, even strangers’ pets! And they do so without worrying about someone’s race, color, creed, sexual orientation, or political ideology. They do it because that’s what we do. Most of us willingly help others in trouble—which is absolutely normal for a highly social species that has survived by *cooperating with*, not killing each other.

But if that’s “reality,” how do these companies push their money-making “you’re surrounded by enemies” narrative so successfully? How do they keep the *amygdala* engaged, actively on the lookout for threats? By what I call “Potemkin terrorism.”

Potemkin terrorism.

You probably know what a “Potemkin village” is—something that is more a façade than what it appears to be. In our case, an entire industry tells us that what *is* there (but actually *is not*) are “enemies who want to destroy us.”

One set of companies tells one group of people (let's call them group A) that another group of people (group B) are their enemies. "Those terrible B-people hate you good and innocent A-people and are plotting to destroy you. We'll keep you up to date on the threat, so you better check with us frequently."

At the same time, other companies are giving a similar message to the other group. "Those terrible A-people hate you good and innocent B-people and are plotting to destroy you. We'll keep you up to date on the threat, so you better check with us frequently."

That's the *Potemkin* part. In *reality*, A-people and B-people are not threats to each other. They're average, normal people.

Now notice how this becomes *Potemkin terrorism*. "Terrorism" is a strategy in which you attack *innocent people*. And that's bad enough. But *Potemkin terrorism* is especially pernicious because it takes *different groups of innocent people* and *weaponizes them against each other*. Both groups of *innocent people* are *victims* and *weapons* at the same time.

As I noted above, however, we aren't really at war with each other. A-people and B-people are ordinary individuals who spend their time and energy tending to

the day-to-day business of living: studying, working, raising their families, pursuing hobbies, and the like.

So how does the industry get us to think we're enemies? By "*stranger danger*."

Stranger danger.

Recall that the amygdala's job is to identify potential threats. Remember, too, that it's one of the older, more primitive parts of the brain. No doubt there was a time in our evolutionary history when humans were more tribal than we are now and when it was prudent to be wary of someone we didn't know—someone *different*, someone from a *different tribe*. At that stage in our evolutionary history, it probably made sense to worry that someone different from us wasn't just "different," but "dangerous." And *that's* what the news/information/opinion industry takes advantage of. The entire industry repeats the same message day after day. "We belong to tribes. People from a tribe different from yours are dangerous. They are your enemy."

Also, notice that Potemkin terrorism talks about *groups* (not individuals) and adds a *negative stereotype*: America-hating liberals! Fascist radical conservatives! Abnormal transgenders! Perverted homosexuals! Crime loving Democrats! Anti-democratic Republicans! Anarchist environmentalists! Greedy capitalists! Lazy,

irresponsible socialists! Godless atheists without a conscience! Dangerous law-and-order hating illegal immigrants! Terrorist sympathizing Muslims!

However, this kind of hate speech and fear-mongering works only if you don't actually know anyone in the group being targeted. If you *do* know someone from that group, you know the stereotype is wrong. What fuels Potemkin terrorism, then, is *ignorance*. What drives up the profits and influence of these companies is a combination of *ignorance*—and the *fear* that such ignorance makes possible.

Skeptical? An assignment.

So there you have it. If you believe you're living in a society at war with each other, you've been played. You've been manipulated by companies who keep you afraid for the sake of profit and to gain influence over you. You are both a *victim* of and a *weapon* being used in someone's Potemkin terrorism campaign.

There's a good chance you may not believe me. If so, I have an assignment for you. Think of the group you currently have been told is your main enemy: liberal, conservative, capitalist, socialist, transgender, homosexual, immigrant, Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, whatever. Using your network of friends and contacts, reach out and find someone from that group and have an "I'd like to get to know a _____ better" conversation with them. You will likely discover that no matter how strongly

you may disagree about some issues, that person is just someone who sees things differently, but otherwise wants to “live and let live.” They are not your enemy.

Practical take-away.

So, what is the practical take-away from this episode? If you’ve bought into the *America divided/two warring tribes* narrative, and if my analysis is right, you’ve probably adopted some beliefs, taken some actions, donated money or voted in a certain way because someone else pulled your strings. You need to keep this from happening again. You need to take a *hard* look at where you’re getting your information about what’s happening around you. That means being skeptical, thinking critically, rejecting ideology, and insisting on *evidence* in your important decisions—because you should be the author of your decisions.

I’m always happy to hear what you think. You can give me feedback through the website’s contact form. When I have enough comments, I’ll do a separate episode responding to them. You can also find transcripts of all episodes on the website, philosophyfortherealworld.com

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Thanks for listening. I’m Professor Thomas White. This has been Philosophy for the Real World.