We Are All Actors
Act 2, Scene 4
"What a Tangled Web"

by
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INT. AN OFFICE

DEBORAH, outreach director at a Non-Profit advocacy
organization, sits at a desk reading a briefing paper. JOHN,
one of the organization's researchers, knocks and enters.

                    JOHN
          Got a minute, Deborah?

                    DEBORAH
          What's up?

                    JOHN
          The survey results are in.

                    DEBORAH
          How did we do?

                    JOHN
          It's... complicated.

                    DEBORAH
          That sounds like bad news.

JOHN drops a report on her desk.

                    JOHN
          Not entirely. There's some bad
          news, but there's good news too.

                    DEBORAH
          Bad news first?

                    JOHN
          We're still having trouble reaching
          people who aren't already in our
          core constituency.

                    DEBORAH
          So what's the good news?

                    JOHN
          I think we understand a little bit
          more about what the problem is.

                    DEBORAH
          Don't keep me in suspense.

                    JOHN
          OK, we asked a bunch of questions
          about peoples' attitudes.
                    (MORE)

                    JOHN (cont'd)
You might think that people
disagree with the logic we use to
draw conclusions, but the problem
actually starts much earlier than
that.

                    DEBORAH
I'd think a lot of people just
disagree with us on principle and
don't even want to listen to logic.

                    JOHN
That's sort of it, but there's more
detail in the survey.

DEBORAH picks up the report JOHN has dropped on her desk.

                    DEBORAH
Really? Where?

                    JOHN
Look on page 7.

She turns to page 7.

                    DEBORAH
OK, what am I looking at?

                    JOHN
We asked people whether they agreed
with our starting point - the
facts.

                    DEBORAH
Oh. That's interesting. A lot of
them think we're distorting the
facts.

                    JOHN
Exactly.

                    DEBORAH
But we're really careful about fact-
finding. Why don't they trust us?

                    JOHN
People know we have a position; if
their first instinct is to disagree
with our position they naturally
look for ways to disagree. And one
way they can disagree is to believe
we're distorting the facts.

                    DEBORAH
        But we cite our sources! And a lot
        of them are non-partisan.

                    JOHN
        It's just a speculation at this
        point - we didn't ask about it in
        the surveys - but my hunch is they
        think we're cherrypicking facts to
        fit our conclusions.

DEBORAH bangs her fist on the table in frustration.

                    DEBORAH
        But that's not fair! And there's
        nothing we can do about it!

                    JOHN
        Actually, I think there might be
        something we could do about it.

                    DEBORAH
        What do you mean? If people don't
        want to trust us, we can't make
        them.

                    JOHN
        You're exactly right. But we might
        be able to make them hear the facts
        from somebody else - somebody they
        do trust.

                    DEBORAH
        I'm not sure I'm following you
        here.

                    JOHN
        If we're going to use facts from
        non-partisan sources anyway, maybe
        we could get those sources involved
        in the conversation.

                    DEBORAH
        Keep going...

                    JOHN
        So our fence-sitters can hear the
        facts directly from our sources.

                    DEBORAH
        Oh - I see - so they don't think
        we're distorting the message.

                    JOHN
Exactly!

                    DEBORAH
OK, but what if we do the research
ourselves?

                    JOHN
Well, then we have to say where the
facts come from of course. But I
think we can still build more
credibility than we do today?

                    DEBORAH
How?

                    JOHN
By involving non-partisan
organizations, or even advocates
for opposing positions, in the
discussion about the facts.

                    DEBORAH
How will that help? Won't it just
generate a lot of argument and
disagreement?

                    JOHN
Yes, but the argument and
disagreement will happen out in the
open, where people can see it.
That way they won't suspect that
something they don't understand is
going on behind the scenes.

                    DEBORAH
OK - I'm not sure I agree with you
on this, but let's follow it for a
minute. How do you get all these
organizations to contribute to our
reports, but in a way that makes
everyone realize that they're
speaking for themselves?

                    JOHN
Well, I'm just thinking out loud
here, but I don't think we can do
it in our reports.

                    DEBORAH
Well then why did you bring it up?

                    JOHN
Because our reports don't have to
be the only way we communicate.

                    DEBORAH
What other way are we supposed to
communicate?

                    JOHN
Maybe in a forum where a bunch of
organizations all speak for
themselves about the same issue -
so everyone knows who researched
the facts, what's a consensus fact,
and what's still disputed.

                    DEBORAH
You mean like Wikipedia?

                    JOHN
Sort of like that - only a little
different. Wikipedia tries to
create one version of the truth. I
think what we need is something
like Wikipedia, but it's got to
include the disagreements on the
front page instead of hiding them
in a discussion page.

                    DEBORAH
Because ...?

                    JOHN
Because we're not describing just
facts. We're describing an
argument. After the argument is
over, it can become a fact, and
then maybe the disagreements can
move to the discussion page as kind
of a history of the process that
led to agreement.

                    DEBORAH
OK, this is interesting. And you
think that if people can see the
argument and see where we agree and
disagree with opposing interest
groups, they'll be more likely to
agree with us?

                    JOHN
          To tell you the truth, I'm not sure
          they're more likely to agree with
          us. But I think they are less
          likely to disagree with us for the
          wrong reasons - I think if we have
          something like what I've described
          (maybe we could call it a
          "consensus wiki"), we'll be able to
          get over arguments about what the
          facts are and at least get people
          to consider our logic.

                    DEBORAH
          And we can't just report other
          organizations' statements of facts
          and position in our own materials?

                    JOHN
          I don't think it would be as
          effective. I think as long as
          we're using our forum, people will
          wonder if we're distorting other
          peoples' messages - because we're
          partisan. We have to get beyond
          the disadvantages of partisanship,
          but we can't stop being partisan.
          We need something like "multi-
          partisanship" or "trans-
          partisanship". If we can use an
          open forum where everyone's on an
          equal footing, then we can keep on
          being partisan in our arguments
          without being suspected of
          distorting the facts in a partisan
          way.

Deborah flips through the poll data report for a long minute.

                    DEBORAH
          What happens if I agree with you,
          John? Can we actually do this?

                    JOHN
          Not quite. A bunch of the building
          blocks are out there, but nobody's
          put them together to do exactly
          this job yet - no one's built one
          of these "consensus wikis".

                    DEBORAH
          How hard do you think it would be?

                    JOHN
I'm not sure. But I think it might
be easier than trying to live
without it.