I Was a Paid Internet Shill

I am writing here to come out of the closet as a paid shill. For a little over six months, I was paid to spread disinformation and argue political points on the Internet. This site, ATS, was NOT one that I was assigned to post on, although other people in the same organization were paid to be here, and I assume they still walk among you. But more on this later.

I quit this job in the latter part of 2011, because I became disgusted with it, and with myself. I realized I couldn't look myself in the mirror anymore. If this confession triggers some kind of retribution against me, so be it. Part of being a real man in this world is having real values that you stand up for, no matter what the consequences.

My story begins in early 2011. I had been out of work for almost a year after losing my last job in tech support. Increasingly desperate and despondent, I jumped at the chance when a former co-worker called me up and said she had a possible lead for me. "It is an unusual job, and one that requires secrecy. But the pay is good. And I know you are a good writer, so its something you are suited for." (Writing has always been a hobby for me). She gave me only a phone-number and an address, in one of the seedier parts of San Francisco, where I live. Intrigued, I asked her for the company's URL and some more info. She laughed. "They don't have a website. Or even a name. You'll see. Just tell them I referred you." Yes, it sounded suspicious, but long-term joblessness breeds desperation, and desperation has a funny way of overlooking the suspicious when it comes to putting food on the table.

The next day, I arrived at the address – the third floor in a crumbling building. The appearance of the place did not inspire confidence. After walking down a long, filthy linoleum-covered corridor lit by dimly-flickering halogen, I came to the entrance of the office itself: a crudely battered metal door with a sign that said "United Amalgamated Industries, Inc." I later learned that this "company" changed its name almost monthly, always using bland names like that which gave no strong impression of what the company actually does. Not too hopeful, I went inside. The interior was equally shabby. There were a few long tables with folding chairs, at which

about a dozen people were tapping away on old, beat-up computers. There were no decorations or ornaments of any type: not even the standard-issue office fica trees or plastic ferns. What a dump. Well, beggars can't be choosers.

The manager, a balding man in his late forties, rose from the only stand-alone desk in the room and came forward with an easy smile. "You must be Chris. Yvette [my ex-co-worker] told me you'd be coming." [Not our real names]. "Welcome. Let me tell you a little about what we do." No interview, nothing. I later learned they took people based solely on referral, and that the people making the referrals, like my ex-colleague Yvette, were trained to pick out candidates based on several factors including ability to keep one's mouth shut, basic writing skills, and desperation for work.

We sat down at his desk and he began by asking me a few questions about myself and my background, including my political views (which were basically non-existent). Then he began to explain the job. "We work on influencing people's opinions here," is how he described it. The company's clients paid them to post on Internet message boards and popular chartrooms, as well as in gaming forums and social networks like Facebook and MySpace. Who were these clients? "Oh, various people," he said vaguely. "Sometimes private companies, sometimes political groups." Satisfied that my political views were not strong, he said I would be assigned to political work. "The best people for this type of job are people like you, without strong views," he said with a laugh. "It might seem counterintuitive, but actually we've found that to be the case." Well, OK. Fine. As long as it comes with a steady paycheck, I'd believe whatever they wanted me to believe, as the guy in Ghostbusters said.

After discussing pay (which was much better than I'd hoped) and a few other details, he then went over the need for absolute privacy and secrecy. "You can't tell anyone what we do here. Not your wife, not your dog." (I have neither, as it happens.) "We'll give you a cover story and even a phone number and a fake website you can use. You will have to tell people you are a consultant. Since your background is in tech support, that will be your cover job. Is this going to be a problem for you?" I assured him it would not. "Well, OK. Shall we get started?"

"Right now?" I asked, a bit taken aback.

"No time like the present!" he said with a hearty laugh.

The rest of the day was taken up with training. Another staff member, a no-nonsense woman in her thirties, was to be my trainer, and training would only last two days. "You seem like a bright guy, you'll get the hang of it pretty fast, I think," she said. And indeed, the job was easier than I'd imagined. My task was simple: I would be assigned to four different websites, with the goal of entering certain discussions and promoting a certain view. I learned later that some of the personnel were assigned to internet message boards (like me), while others worked on Facebook or chatrooms. It seems these three types of media each have different strategy for shilling, and each shill concentrates on one of the three in particular.

My task? "To support Israel and counter anti-Israeli, anti-Semitic posters." Fine with me. I had no opinions one way or another about Israel, and who likes anti-Semites and Nazis? Not me, anyway. But I didn't know too much about the topic. "That's OK," she said. "You'll pick it up as you go along. For the most part, at first, you will be doing what we call "meme-patrol." This is pretty easy. Later if you show promise, we'll train you for more complex arguments, where more in-depth knowledge is necessary."

She handed me two binders with sheets enclosed in limp plastic. The first was labeled simply "Israel" in magic-marker on the cover, and it had two sections .The first section contained basic background info on the topic. I would have to read and memorize some of this, as time went on. It had internet links for further reading, essays and talking points, and excerpts from some history books. The second, and larger, section was called "Strat" (short for "strategy") with long lists of "dialogue pairs." These were specific responses to specific postings. If a poster wrote something close to "X," we were supposed to respond with something close to "Y." "You have to mix it up a bit, though," said my trainer. "Otherwise it gets too obvious. Learn to use a thesaurus." This section also contained a number of hints for de-railing conversations that went too far away from what we were attempting. These strategies included various forms of personal attacks, complaining to the forum moderators, smearing the characters of our opponents, using images and icons effectively, and even dragging the tone of the conversation down with sexual innuendo, links to pornography, or other such things. "Sometimes we have to fight dirty," or trainer told us. "Our opponents don't hesitate to, so we can't either."

The second binder was smaller, and it contained information specific to the web sites I would be assigned to. The sites I would work were: Godlike Productions, Lunatic Outpost, CNN news, Yahoo News, and a handful of smaller sites that rotated depending on need. As stated, I was NOT assigned to work ATS (although others in my group were), which is part of the reason I am posting this here, rather than elsewhere. I wanted to post this on Godlike Productions at first, but they have banned me from even viewing that site for some reason (perhaps they are onto me?). But if somebody connected with this site can get the message to them, I think they should know about it, because that was the site I spent a good 70% of my time working on.

The site-specific info in the second binder included a brief history each site, including recent flame-wars, as well as info on what to avoid on each site so as not to get banned. It also had quite detailed info on the moderators and the most popular regged posters on each site: location (if known), personality type, topics of interest, background sketch, and even some notes on how to "push the psychological buttons" of different posters. Although I didn't work for ATS, I did see they had a lot of info on your so-called "WATS" posters here (the ones with gold borders around their edges). "Focus on the popular posters," my trainer told me. "These are the influential ones. Each of these is worth 50 to 100 of the lesser known names." Each popular poster was classified as "hostile," "friendly," or "indifferent" to my goal. We were supposed to cultivate friendship with the friendly posters as well as the mods (basically, by brownnosing and sucking up), and there were even notes on strategies for dealing with specific hostile posters. The info was pretty detailed, but not perfect in every case. "If you can convert one of the hostile posters from the enemy side to our side, you get a nice bonus. But this doesn't happen too often, sadly. So mostly you'll be attacking them and trying to smear them."

At first, like I said, my job was "meme-patrol." This was pretty simple and repetitive; it involved countering memes and introducing new memes, and didn't demand much in-depth knowledge of the subject. Mostly just repetitive posting based on the dialogue pairs in the "Strat" section of the first binder. A lot of my job was de-railing and spamming threads that didn't go our way, or making accusations of racism and anti-Semitism. Sometimes I had to simply lie and claim a poster said something or did something "in another thread" they really hadn't said or done I felt bad about this…but in

the end I felt worse about the possibility of losing the first job I'd been able to get since losing my "real" job.

The funny thing was, although I started the job with no strong opinions or political views, after a few weeks of this I became very emotionally wedded to the pro-Israel ideas I was pushing. There must be some psychological factor at work…a good salesman learns to honestly love the products he's selling, I guess. It wasn't long before my responses became fiery and passionate, and I began to learn more about the topic on my own. "This is a good sign," my trainer told me. "It means you are ready for the next step: complex debate."

The "complex debate" part of the job involved a fair amount of additional training, including memorizing more specific information about the specific posters (friendly and hostile) I'd be sparring with. Here, too, there were scripts and suggested lines of argument, but we were given more freedom. There were a lot of details to this more advanced stage of the job – everything from how to select the right avatar to how to use "demotivationals" (humorous images with black borders that one finds floating around the web). Even the proper use of images of cats was discussed. Sometimes we used faked or photo-shopped images or doctored news reports (something else that bothered me).

I was also given the job of tying to find new recruits, people "like me" who had the personality type, ability to keep a secret, basic writing/thinking skills, and desperation necessary to sign on a shill. I was less successful at this part of the job, though, and I couldn't find another in the time I was there.

After a while of doing this, I started to feel bad. Not because of the views I was pushing (as I said, I was first apolitical, then pro-Israel), but because of the dishonesty involved. If my arguments were so correct, I wondered, why did we have to do this in the first place? Shouldn't truth propagate itself naturally, rather than through, well…propaganda? And who was behind this whole operation, anyway? Who was signing my paychecks? The stress of lying to my parents and friends about being a "consultant" was also getting to me. Finally, I said enough was enough. I quit in September 2011. Since then I've been working a series of unglamorous temp office jobs for lower pay. But at least I'm not making my living lying and heckling people who come online to express their views and exercise freedom of speech.

A few days ago I happened to be in the same neighborhood and on a whim thought I'd check out the old office. It turns out the operation is gone, having moved on. This, too, I understood, is part of their strategy: Don't stay in the same place for too long, don't keep the same name too long, move on after half a year or so. Keeping a low profile, finding new employees through word of mouth: All this is part of the shill way of life. But it is a deceptive way of life, and no matter how noble the goals (I remain pro-Israel, by the way), these sleazy means cannot be justified by the end.

This is my confession. I haven't made up my mind yet about whether I want to talk more about this, so if I don't respond to this thread, don't be angry. But I think you should know: Shills exist. They are real. They walk among you, and they pay special attention to your popular gold-bordered WATS posters. You should be aware of this. What you choose to do with this awareness is up to you.

Yours,

ExShill

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