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The Philosopher Is In

MINDFULNESS

Beat the Simulation and Seize Control of Your Life

The internet is a giant manipulation machine; here are some ways to fight back.

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Reviewed by Hara Estroff Marano



KEY POINTS

- The simulation hypothesis can reinforce a cynical dismissal of human potential.
- Online platforms increasingly rationalize neuromarketing techniques and manipulate decisions.
- Overcome this process by using cognitive boosting techniques that build critical reflection and mindfulness.

By Julian Friedland, Ph.D., and Kristian Myrseth, Ph.D.

By now, you've presumably heard of the simulation hypothesis, a much-hyped metaphysical conceit of many a Silicon Valley tech mogul. It's a shrugging dismissal of our world as amounting quite probably to nothing more than idle amusement for denizens of a super-advanced cyber-civilization that gets its kicks by observing us living out our lives in a virtual petri dish.



The neuro-marketing puppet master Guest authors Friedland and Myrseth

Numerous philosophers since Descartes have demonstrated the absurdity of such a view: What's there to stop the simulators from themselves being simulated, in an infinite regress of simulations? And if we could actually discover that we're in a simulation via some telling quantum signature—as proponents maintain—then that knowledge itself would have to be accurate and genuine, including presumably other critical judgments that rely on the same cognitive faculties.

This delusive notion smacks of the kind of narcissistic nihilism one normally outgrows after adolescence. Sadly, however, many are carrying this cynicism into adulthood, which wouldn't necessarily be a problem were they not also the ones designing the platforms we now spend most of our waking hours on.

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While it may conveniently let them off the hook of having to worry about the dystopic implications of a future in which all our choices are determined by the AI infrastructures they set into motion, the rest of us lab rats don't have multimillion-dollar bunkers to escape to when the apocalypse erupts.

Thankfully, there may well be a way to nip Skynet in the bud, and retain some control over our lives. But first, we'll need to understand how the cyberhooks dig into our heads one nudge at a time.

A Brave New Nudging World

As Aldous Huxley predicted in his masterpiece *Brave New World*, societies will continue to be controlled by punishment and, to an ever-increasing extent, by the more effective methods of reward and scientific manipulation. Indeed, this is increasingly the case as advances in neuromarketing condition us to behave in predictable ways via complex tapestries of online nudges.

Nudges accomplish this by leveraging our fast and impulsive *reactions*, which require far less energy than slow and deliberative *reflections*. They do so by introducing mild financial rewards, by gamification ("enter for a chance to win!"), by structuring reward patterns to maximize compulsion (the "variable ratio reward," in apps and casinos alike), or by acti-

tions in whichever ways the designers deem desirable. The result is a brave new consumer, pliable and with the attention span of a goldfish.

The upside is that such techniques save time and can induce responsible behavior by engaging many who wouldn't otherwise or by preventing predictable mistakes. The downside is that they can also have subtle negative consequences that are difficult to detect in real time but that gradually undermine human competence at potentially every level of engagement. This can happen through skill loss and by extrinsic rewards becoming their own targets, thereby replacing deliberative ethical motivations.

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Eventually, if we aren't given any financial, emotional, or reputational carrots—or sticks—we may have no reason to do much of anything and come to lack the capacity to think for ourselves in new and unforeseen situations. Behavioral manipulation may also lead people to support well-meaning but ill-considered fads or may anger those who see the nudges as coercive. There is, hence, a longer-term danger that interacting in environments where neuromarketing and behavioral conditioning are commonplace can foster a culture in which critical reflection and ethical competence become superfluous, making us all essentially automatons in a deterministic (un)reality.

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A Way Out of the Manipulation Machine

It's time to chart a new course that steers us out of this determinist abyss of techno-adolescent fantasy and reactivity. A new and more optimistic trend in cognitive science—"boosting"—offers an alternative. Unlike nudging, which aims to trigger behavioral reactions, boosting invites critical reflection and mindfulness. So instead of asking, "How can we manipulate people?", boosters ask: "How can we improve decision-making competence?"

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At the personal level, boosting opportunities abound: from supporting reasonable internet regulations that limit neuro-marketing toward children and adolescents to using online mindfulness techniques. Tristan Harris' Center for Humane Technology provides some good tips on how to accomplish this, starting with turning off notifications and alerts and using

ulating and addictive. It's also good to try to follow a few media sources you may not always agree with and to support local journalism, which tends to build reflective trust communities by reporting on local events that everyone can confirm with their own eyes.

At the organizational level, boosting can reduce reactive biases and help us develop greater moral self-awareness by introducing speed bumps that ask us to slow down and to consider what our choices say about us. They can involve client-centered therapeutic practices and motivational interviewing techniques that elicit edifying goals and optimal action plans. But whatever forms they take, boosts maintain two fundamental principles: that humans can improve and that such improvement is both wanted and warranted.

These principles shouldn't be hard to accept. They constitute the Enlightenment project that yielded our foundational civic values of freedom, equality, and self-rule. Yet they are continually under threat from relentless waves of belittling cynicism that undermine human agency and potential.

The simulation hypothesis is only the latest contemptuous intellectual fad, and the consequences of acquiescing to it can be deeply corrupting, especially if you're running a mega-cap technology firm or developing generative AI. Instead, each of us should try looking more upward to our potential and gazing less downward to our navel.

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research focuses on decision-making and judgment in behavioral economics.

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About the Author



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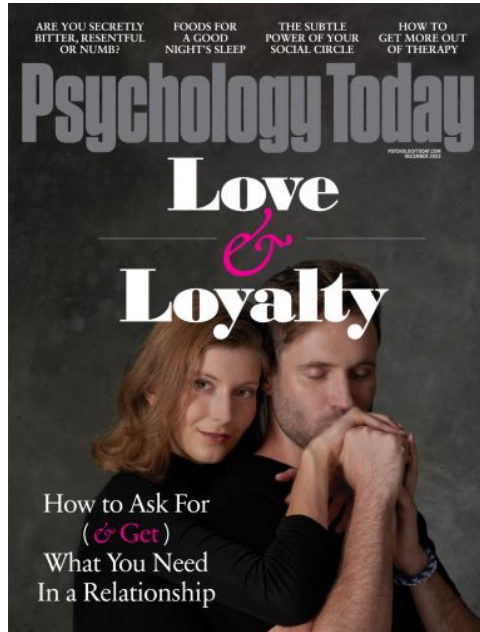
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