Manipulation of Others

by Bill Herbst

Increasingly, we live in a society — America — and a world — modern civilization — where the bottom line of our unconscious agreement is that manipulation of others, either overtly or covertly, is perfectly fine. In America, the number one reason to manipulate others is get money, whether we call it profit from business, contributions, or support. There are, of course, other motivations to manipulate people, such as gaining social approval, friendship, and/or affection, or bolstering one's reputation to gain more power within a group, but these pale compared to the monetary profit motive. I'd guess that 98% of the advertising we're subjected to visually in video, through the spoken word, or in print is aimed to increase and maximize the advertiser's profits.

To some extent, this has always been true. Both obvious and subtle manipulation of others are fundamental elements in human interaction — convincing others to do our bidding or give us what we want or need isn't new. We've been doing that since our first primate ancestors appeared on the scene. Historically, though, and pre-historically as well, that tendency to manipulate others was juxtaposed against very different motivations — helping rather than using others, giving rather than taking, being generous rather than selfish. There was a balance between these kinds of pushes and pulls, an equilibrium.

No more. Now, give and take apply only to those we consider "Us." Anyone we regard as "Them" is fair game for raw exploitation. We give them nothing, and take from them everything we can get. And we do so without the slightest qualms of doubt, remorse, or guilt.

In some ways, this is the legacy of corporate consumerism.

Even more than "regular" corporate America, however, the draconian business model of total manipulation is the creation of Big Tech through Social Media. The naïve idealists of early social media, who were convinced that they were going to change the world for the better, had to come up with a way to monetize their new and rapidly-growing platforms. They needed to make money, and the business model they created was unlike anything that ever existed before.

These companies — almost all of which have arisen in the 21st century to become multi-billion-dollar giants — use a business model where their users (that means you and me) *are* their products. Again, that's not new. Television

networks have been doing that since the 1950s. The product of network television was always viewers. TV shows were the bait used to catch the "fish" (meaning viewers). These captive viewers were then used to sell advertising time to companies hawking their products — more viewers for a given show meant that higher rates could be charged for advertising. That's how TV networks made their money.

What changed in the business model of the upstart social media companies was the technology available to hone in on viewers (now called users rather than viewers), so that the packaged information put together from watching users' behaviors could be elevated to levels of sophistication, detail, and specificity that were unprecedented and literally had never been possible before.

This is where algorithms come in. Algorithms (at least in the way social media companies developed and use them) are computer programs that track and record *everything* we do online with our desktops, laptops, pads, and phones. The code is written so that the algorithms respond to what we do by showing us more content that is deemed similar. This is "target marketing" that's custom-tailored beyond the wildest dreams of any traditional salesman. A good door-to-door salesman can look at a neighborhood, a street, or a given house, and tell you the odds of his making a sale. Algorithms take that savvy to a level of predictive precision that is downright insane.

So, users are manipulated — both subtly and no-so-subtly — through algorithmic tracking and tailored responses to spend more and more time online, all the while being milked for data (literally, by recording everything users do with their devices — what buttons they push, what mouse movements they make, what keys they type, what links they click, what they swipe on their phones, how long a particular image or web page is displayed onscreen, etc., etc.), and then this information is packaged and sold to advertisers to maximize success of their ads.

These companies do not care AT ALL about the human well-being of their billions of users. They care ONLY about profit. Their users are simply sheep to be shorn for the wool of their money. More money. Endlessly more. No amount of money is ever enough to satisfy the business model of overt and covert manipulation, and that business model will never be modified to become more generous, humane, or respectful toward their users' lives.

This has now reached a level of insanity where the sophistication of manipulative technique is no longer determined by the humans in charge. That's unnecessary. Artificial Intelligence is sufficiently far enough along already that the algorithms that are so potently manipulating us now operate with continual self-learning. The algorithms teach themselves how to manipulate us more effectively — second by second, minute by minute, and day by day — and they do so by altering their own computer code accordingly. All that's left for the humans in the company to do apparently is rake in and manage the profits.

There is no serious discussion of the ethics or morality of what is being done through the business model. Some silicon valley giants have committees that supposedly grapple with ethical and moral considerations, but these watchdogs are toothless and routinely ignored in-house. Profits beat the hell out of ethics every time. 1950s Beat poet Allen Ginsberg's most famous poem — *Howl* — with its terrified cries of *"Moloch! Moloch!"* has now come to pass in our day-to-day reality. This unquestioned inhumanity is now business-as-usual.

To make matters even worse, the algorithms have discovered and incorporated a truism that psychology learned many decades ago, namely, that so-called negative emotions have a much more powerful impact on human behavior than positive emotions do. "Negative" here means aggression and conflict, while "positive" implies peacefulness and harmony. Our aggressive emotional states and reactions — anger (Mars), hatred (Pluto), and self-righteous affront (Jupiter) — elicit more immediate tangible responses than their peaceful counterparts — comfort (Moon), joy (Venus), and empathy/compassion (Neptune). So, the algorithms are designed to manipulate us by "rewarding" our aggressive emotions, since that's what propels us out of our seat and into action. Then the algorithms teach themselves to offer such "rewards" (meaning more targeted stimulation) with ever greater refinement and precision.

One might presume that men are the problem here, since it's the masculine archetypes that are targeted. After all, the mass shootings now common in America are always committed by males, typically younger men. So, are men the problem? Well, yes and no. Regardless of gender, everyone's psyche contains both masculine and feminine sides. The masculine archetype in each of us operates in crisis mode, with peak readiness for response and action. The feminine archetype operates more smoothly and over longer duration, providing the basic values of stability. Think of it as a soldier who serves his queen. She decides what is valued, and he goes out and gets it for her.

Finally, the point of an algorithm is to get us to buy something. The algorithm watches for whatever stimulates our values (the feminine) and activates our desires (the masculine), resulting in our taking out our wallets, plunking down our money, and buying something. That's why advertisers are willing to pay social media companies to target their ads to consumers. Getting our money. That's what this whole thing is about.

Unfortunately, social media platforms — Facebook, Twitter, and the rest — not only make us poorer in money, but through impoverishment of spirit as well, since their algorithms reward "negative" emotions that divide and separate people into increasingly rigid and superficial "Us versus Them" categories.

One might think that being invited to join groups of like-minded individuals would be good thing, and perhaps it was originally intended to be. But in the warped virtual world of social media, it's not good. Every group we join becomes another exclusive silo — we gain a few more of "us," but inadvertently a whole

lot more of "them" are created. The illusion is greater belonging. The reality is more serious alienation — further social division rather than greater social inclusion. That's the difference between a club and a clique. A club offers open membership. Anyone can join. A clique is closed. Membership in a clique is by-invitation-only.

I've long been fond of the semi-serious joke that adult life is essentially high school writ large, just a repeat of every bad social experience we suffered back then. Almost all of us who went to high school experienced the exclusion of cliques. Well, in less than two decades, social media has created an entire global civilization that looks an awful lot like the terrible cliques of high school.

I understand all too well that the world is not as I would wish it to be. I'm not against manipulation, *per se*. Essentially, manipulation is power, and I don't see power as an inherently bad thing. To be truly righteous and good, though, the use of power needs to be guided by love, and not just love in the small sense of what or whom I value personally, but love in a larger sense of all of us together as one family. So, what I'm against is unloving manipulation — manipulation of others to gain personal advantage.

What I believe in is manipulating ourselves toward becoming better, more mature, more loving and compassionate human beings. Not smarter (we're smart enough), but wiser. Less brittle and more durable. Less desperate and more patient. Less cruel and more kind. Less harsh and more gentle.

I'm certain that many people are committed to those goals. But I fear that many more people aren't. I worry that a helluva lot of people simply accept and emulate whatever they see in the "civilized" society in which they live. What they see (whether or not they're aware of seeing it) is manipulation of others for personal gain, and so they assume it must be OK for them to do that too. And so the cycles of inhumanity, of power without love, repeat — over and over, handed down from one traumatized generation to the next.

For better or worse, I am a creature of my times. I have no doubt that I've succumbed in many ways to the inhumane pressures of modern civilization. I am committed, however, to resisting those pressures as much as I can, even though that's sometimes only a little. Hell, at times I feel unable to resist at all. My failures far outnumber my successes.

Despite that, however, I can't give up. I feel that I must not give in, and I won't surrender to the inhumanity that is now accepted as standard in society. My name for that inhumanity is *Death Culture,* and I will resist it in every way I can, right to my final breath.