All.Net Analyst Report and Newsletter

Welcome to our Analyst Report and Newsletter

A different view of the future

A lot of folks today are speculating about the AI[1]-enhanced cyberized future we may all live in. The major line of speculation is the fusion of psychological operations, directed learning generative AI, and influence campaigns to drive individuals, groups, and societies toward the objectives of the various powerful interests. Ultimately this ends up in a Bond movie scenario where the very definition of the good and bad sides are smeared then exchanged and ultimately all of the things we believe and do are dictated by the (initially human controlled) cyber overlords.

There is a lot of science and pseudo-science behind all of this, and plenty of evidence of the potentials of this future. And we see reflections of this in the current spate of AI in social media, the seemingly crazy behaviors of much of the population around us with regard to whatever the moment-to-moment thing is, and the increasing sensor, actuator, control, and communications forming the upcoming cyber world. People are clearly susceptible to manipulation through these methods and people and entities interested in manipulation are already successfully using them.

However...

We are only at the beginning… of both the technology and the human interaction with it. A lot of the current thinking surrounding these mechanisms is based on the notion of people who refuse to think and rethink their experience and don't have the mental antibodies to protect against external influences.

Telling a good story seems to be the underlying path to influence. And narrative, as they say, is how the story is told. There is a famous quote regarding compelling narrative to the effect that, if you start with fact and end with fact, everything in the middle can be BS and you will still be believed. Of course this relates to primacy and recency effects known for many years from human psychological experiments.

Perception is not reality

But perception seems awfully real. And we see what we want to see. What makes the difference is when reality is at odds with perception.

When I was young, I was convinced I could walk through walls if I truly believed it. Of course the person on the belief side will tell me that I wasn't a true believe, because I didn't walk through the wall. Rather, I bumped my nose. So I concluded, perhaps naively, that no matter what I thought, there was a reality, and my nose proved it to me. This is the basis of science.

- Counterargument: It was your perception of bumping your nose that made it seem real.

We are indeed bound by perception. But we perceive based on physicality as well as internal thought processes. And as we separate them from each other, we become unable to function in the physical world. And the result, for those who have not escaped to the ethereal plane, is that eventually we see what our bodies encounter or we will be unable to survive that reality.

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1 Artificial Intelligence

Not bumping your nose

As long as the claims don't cause you to bump your nose, it can be credible, and you can even have a few nose bumps and continue to believe you can walk through walls. "Don't confuse me with the facts", "Who are you going to believe, me or your lying eyes?", "If you want to believe it, you will".

All of these work, up to a point. The holocaust, the real one, not the lies you hear today calling lesser conflict-related events by the same name, resulted in millions of people dying, gypsies and Jews among the prominent victims. And World War 2 as a whole resulted in something like 40M people dying. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in about 1 million excess deaths in the US, something like 1% of everyone who was diagnosed. Worldwide diagnosed cases are on the order of between 500M and 1B people, with about 1% of those people dying. You can talk yourself into believing that they all dies from something else, but they are dead. And that is a reality that their families have to face regardless of the attribution of cause.

In the US today, we hear more and more from the media that defies our physical perception. There are tactics that put this off, like claiming that while you are fine, your neighbors or the people in the next town are not. But that only lasts so long. Even in the most media-controlled places on Earth, when you actually get a chance to talk to people, they differentiate between the propaganda and the reality. Yes they believe many of the narratives, and buy into things you and I might find crazy. But when reality smacks them in the face, they feel the sting. And as much as you can try to tell them it's actually not a slap in the face, it's awfully hard to make that stick under less than constant control.

Easily fooled

It's true, people are easily fooled, at the tactical level, about specific things, using specific mechanisms. And the future of AI-enhanced influence operations is the ability to individualize and do continuous real-time monitoring and manipulation. Going toward the Matrix, the series of movies based on the premise of complete control over perception of the entire population, seems like it could work. And people spend more and more time in front of computers, me more than almost anybody you are likely to find to date over the course of a lifetime. But there is still the physical reality about us.

Not so…

easily as it turns out. I go for a walk every day along the ocean. And when I didn't live near the ocean, I walked wherever I lived. And I eat and sleep and defecate and urinate and have had children, and on and on. There is a physical reality to life, there are physical mechanisms of our species, and while enough drugs will screw us up pretty badly, every once in a while, I still bump my nose or sprain something, I am aging, and so forth.

People have to deal with their reality. An no matter where you are, it's not going to work if you cannot feed the people, because they will feel the hunger. You can starve them and tell them it's because of someone else, but at some point they will risk their lives to get food for themselves and their families. If you have it and they don't, they will take it or die trying. Within the bounds of what people will tolerate and to the extent you can change those bounds over time by narrative and coercion, you can probably push people quite a way. But at some point, if you go too far, your influences will turn into revolution against you and your forceful manipulation, even as you used the tools of manipulation to put you in power.

People are not cattle

Dystopia aside, while theory tells us that if we are good enough at it, we can ultimately push people into all sorts of crazy belief systems, reality is that the world is moving in a direction toward individual freedom, health, longevity, and enlightenment, not over short periods of time, but over the arc of history. And it makes a lot of sense that this must continue, particularly in a future with technological manipulation as such a high priority among the powerful. We may eventually breed ourselves into submission, but then we will not survive.

Never forget the knights of the realm

All of this high technology manipulation depends on something absolutely critical. The technology. And for the foreseeable future, science fiction aside, smart, diligent, thoughtful, intelligent, creative people will be required to continue this. All the king's horses won't protect the king from the hordes if the knights of the realm aren't there to support them. And while the knights may be in a special position and benefit from the control over the masses, they too are not the king, and as history has shown, you can only push them so far before they start to act against you.

These modern knights are the engineers, scientists, operators, and other folks that comprise the supply chain of the tools of manipulation. I know a lot of these folks, and while they may get a bit over-interested in their technologies and their toys, they are mostly thoughtful people. They may get caught up in a political situation and come to believe all sorts of things. They engage in fantasies and become the puppets of politicians and manipulation like anyone else. But they are not stupid, and they see what's going on. And by far, most of them are honest, good, well-meaning people.

I do not believe that they will go down the path of ultimate manipulation forever, and without them doing so, the world will not fall into this sort of trap.

But AI will replace all of them

You may have fallen into the trap of believing this sort of hyperbole. But consider this. You have been subjected to an influence campaign that, while a bit more sophisticated than the previous attempts, has been a central claim of AI pundits at least since I was young. It has never been true, and it is certainly not true today.

When, if ever, will it be true? If we had AI today that could do everything a human could do and more, It would most certainly take at least 50 years after technically feasibility before it would be realized at scale. Not because we could not manufacture enough of them for them to take over manufacturing more of themselves and replacing all of us. And not because of some other technical or material-related issue, even though there are likely lots of those that would also get in the way. Rather because, until people are out of the loop, people will slow the process, even if they intend to make it go quickly.

If it does it won't care about us

But suppose somehow AI influence operations changed everything about the way people think and do so that we immediately and slavishly did whatever the manipulators told us to do. Why would the super brain care about us once it could do whatever it wanted by itself? It might kill us off or ignore us, but in what craziness does anyone imagine computer overlords would want to spend time manipulating puny stupid humans? We're not even good pets.

AI and cyber stuff is not the problem

If we look at history, modern and not so modern, what we universally find is not that societies with excellent educational systems and enlightened populations fall into dystopian tendencies. Rather, we see almost all such issues coming from the less educated and less aware of facts portions of the population being exploited by the people wishing to gain power over them.

Mass persuasion does not take cyber stuff. It was done by Hitler with the advantage of the printing press, radio, and air travel. But it was done by Christianity by word of mouth, horse and buggy, and hand-written documents. And it is being done largely today by radical Islam in person, one on one, with minor support by telecommunications and Internet infrastructure. Religion itself is based on reproducing memes, and those memes are, from the rational perspective, as crazy as the craziest of conspiracy theories, perhaps even crazier. While conspiracy theories count on people doing crazy things, for the most part, they do not include mystical forces that can see everything and change anything at will.

The problem is the people behind it all

These influence operations are enhanced by technology, but so can be the countermeasures taken against them. The problem really lies in who is behind what. By definition, criminals are behind influence operations of a criminal nature. Religious fanatics are behind religious influence operations, and by that I do not mean to say that they necessarily have evil intent. I just mean to say that you have to be fanatical to in pursuit of anything to the point where you spend much of your life trying to persuade others of it. The companies pushing AI for profit are also fanatical, to the point where they are stealing content from anyone and everyone they can find content from, to train their influence machines. At this point, reports assert that more than 50% of all content on the Internet being generated is generated by AI. So now they are even training themselves on themselves in a vicious cycle in order to get more money from the rest of us. There are also, of course, good people, trying to train AI mechanisms to differentiate diagnostically between illness and wellness, and so forth.

And the useful idiots

Of course all of these influence campaigns only work if you have the useful idiots out there buying into them. By the way, the technical definition of an idiot is someone with an IQ below 25[2] and likely you have never met one. The definition of a "useful idiot" is more like "a naive or credulous person who can be manipulated or exploited to advance a cause or political agenda".[3] And likely you have met plenty of these, perhaps including yourself and myself, depending on the source of the information. Which is to say:

People are not perfect

We are all useful idiots relative to influence operations at some times or another. But I don't see the future as populated by the useful idiots in all of us all the time. Rather, I see us learning to live with technology, creating new and enforcing existing laws, and adapting.

Conclusions

I think the future is a good one, and that the technologies of influence will become something we adapt to and start to use in benevolent ways to advance humanity. But we will see...

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2   https://mn.gov/mnddc/parallels2/pdf/70s/74/74-NNS-PCR_Chapter_3.pdf
3   https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/useful%20idiot