

Navigating Autonomy and Influence: A Discourse on Digital Manipulation

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Introduction

In this scholarly paper, Susser, Roessler, and Nissenbaum (2019) venture into the complex and multifaceted topic of technology, autonomy and online manipulation, which have become especially pressing following high-profile scandals such as Facebook and Cambridge Analytica. Through this response paper, I intend to dissect the central terms, claims, and evidence utilised by the authors, assess how these may affect individual and social autonomy, and present a critical commentary, incorporating the writers' claims and my personal reflections on the extensive issue of digital manipulation.

Explanation of Key Terms and Arguments

The Discourse is based on the central idea of online manipulation. It is described as "the use of information technology to covertly influence another person's decision-making, by targeting and exploiting their decision-making vulnerabilities." This insidious form of influence stands in contrast to more overt methods like persuasion and coercion, which engage directly with the target's capacity for rational thought. The essence of online manipulation lies in its exploitation of comprehensive data collection to subtly shift decision-making, often unbeknownst to the individual. Manipulators utilize the rich digital footprints left by users, alongside sophisticated algorithms, to guide decisions towards outcomes that benefit the manipulator, thereby eroding the individual's autonomy in making genuine choices.

Autonomy is delineated as the capacity for individuals to make independent decisions that resonate with their own beliefs, desires, and values, unmarred by undue external influence. It emphasizes the individual's ability to introspect about their motivations and authentically identify with them.

Important Arguments presented by Susser et. al (2019):

- Boiled down to its simplest form, this relates to digital surveillance; this gives platforms the data they need to "fuel" manipulative approaches and hit individual soft spots.
- The distinction between manipulation and other forms of influence lays particular emphasis on the insidiousness of manipulation and its direct assault on autonomy.
- Exploitation of cognitive biases through personalized and adaptive choice architecture design to nudge users toward pre-decided choices without explicit awareness.
- Ethical, social, and democratic consequences of autonomous manipulation, would create existential risks for people and threaten the grounds of democracy and social coexistence. This paper discusses the ethical issues and social consequences of undermining personal autonomy, which are important in the need for reflective appraisal of evidence proffered and deliberative measures to protect autonomy in the digital age.

Evaluation of Evidence

The authors come up with different examples to support their argument of how the prevalence is increasing and how the decisions at scale are being influenced by online manipulations. The Cambridge Analytica scandal revealed how the data of users were being used for political micro-targeting. Leaked Facebook documents showed tracking of users' emotional vulnerabilities. "Dark patterns" in web design and apps manipulate choices through deceitful designs, while "gig economy" platforms like Uber are famous for exploiting motivational vulnerabilities for the management of workers' behaviours. As gripping as the above higher-profile examples are, they might not illustrate deeper, more insidious, everyday manipulations. The examples provided could be said to be more of an anecdotal and weak nature, where more empirical data would strengthen the evidence base. Nevertheless, the examples illustrate well-founded mechanisms like exploiting cognitive biases and emotional vulnerabilities through personalized choice architectures. This evidence does, in fact, ground conceptual arguments in real cases, raising the question far above the level of speculation—ranging from political to commercial, to the workplace context. Overall, the evidence, despite its own limitations, discloses quite persuasively the troubling implications of online manipulation in many life contexts.

Synthesis of Reading

The study by Susser et al. (2019) is important in the aspect of technology, autonomy and manipulation. This paper hence looks into the mechanisms of online manipulation and its effects on autonomy through the lens of individualism, finding out the covert ways through which digital platforms might steer individual choice and emphasise broader ethical and democratic concerns this raises. We synthesize these insights by arguing that one of the most pressing challenges for society is to find ways of navigating a balance between mobilizing digital technologies for the huge potential benefits they offer but also guarding against their capacities to subtly undermine autonomy. The discussion carries much weight in the discourse of digital ethics, pointing great emphasis on the needed policies and technologies, which can urgently put individual autonomy at the very forefront of protection amidst complexities brought about by the digital era.

Personal Voice and Critical Analysis

The observation made by Susser et al. (2019) on the issue of autonomy and online manipulation is both quite informative and alarming. While they have well defended their definition of online manipulation and argued well that it maliciously affects autonomy, on the other hand, I find that the evidence is somewhat narrow, focusing on notorious cases. The examples focus on the best cases, but one would wish for a more nuanced critique of daily digital experiences. Recommendation algorithms, for example, on streaming platforms like Netflix or social media feeds, dramatically form our perceived choice—albeit more subtly. Besides, such personal assistants as Alexa interact dynamically with human psychology since their permanent presence and feedback are always alive and sensitive to the service requests of the users, hence, unconsciously imposing changes in behavioural patterns. Moreover, the ethics of data tracking through progressively integrated smart home devices and conducting targeted advertisement practices are questionable. The authors are right not to endorse such rationalistic conceptions of autonomy, but the situated view could be usefully extended to the different cultural contexts outside the Western liberal tradition. I argue that protecting autonomy in technology-saturated times requires more holistic solutions from a nuanced, cross-cultural perspective.

Conclusion

This paper adopts a reflective analysis of how the independence principle is compromised due to online manipulation, creating space for many ethical and social problems. When consciousness is under control at whatever level, one's life autonomy and comprehension are interfered with: he or she is not in a position to take charge of life. This calls for vigilance not only from policymakers and technologists but users who are the ultimate tool for having a digital age that is the epitome of democratic principles and respects individualism in decision-making. Developing rules for data collection is what the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) encourages for positive growth.

Or, as the authors write, "To fight manipulations online, we need to deprive it of personal data—the oxygen that feeds it—and arm potential targets with awareness, understanding, and savvy about the forces they're up against." It is a fact that online manipulators are making heavy use of personal data to notice our weak points and be vulnerable, but without detailed profiles of our preferences, this ability would be vastly mitigated.

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