

Digital Manipulation: Sleight of Hand, Sleight of Mind - Part 1

Photo and video manipulation has become technologically routine in this age of digital media.

Images now can be superimposed on another object, or even totally manufactured digitally, through what is called morphogenetic creations that use computer graphics to create not only static, but dynamic, 3D images.

And with available technology and software, video images can now literally be manipulated to produce an entirely fabricated digital recording of a subject.

This kind of manipulation uses a combination of traditional video processing and video editing techniques using other nascent digital methods like artificial intelligence (face recognition software and so on).

Facial structure, body movements, gestures and voice of the subject can now be mimicked and replicated.

There are clearly beneficial applications of these tools such as in multifarious educational videos.

But, unfortunately, in every benevolent use of a new discovery, humans always have a proclivity to find a way to use it malevolently.

What digital manipulation has enabled in photography, it has enabled in video. In both instances, digital and video manipulation is now also used in propaganda and disinformation.

What has made social media and digital technology such powerful communication platforms in our culture is evidenced by the emerging debate between the social media behemoth, Facebook, and U.S. regulators, who now seek to require

<https://ethicsdaily.com/digital-manipulation-sleight-of-hand-sleight-of-mind-part-1/> January 9, 2020 Elmo Familiaran

Facebook to monitor and edit its paid advertisement content of false information.

This debate right now is heightened by an upcoming national election, during a time of profound political and cultural polarization in America.

But advertising money is the lucrative currency of Facebook, and political ads are aplenty these days.

It doesn't matter at this point, as proponents of Facebook argue, whether the ad is spreading false or misleading information or not because such is protected under free speech.

So, with an army of lobbyists and lawyers, Facebook is resisting regulatory efforts on the grounds that it is not a publisher and, therefore, is not subject to the same editorial and ethical responsibilities that govern other publishers.

This belies the reality that the vast majority of people on the planet consume information and news from social media platforms.

Like what the invention of the moveable metal type did to revolutionize the spread of written information, the internet has revolutionized the spread of not only the written document, but also accelerated into nanospeed the oftentimes covert and deliberate spread of false information in order to obscure the truth and influence public opinion.

The reality is that our public sphere is awash with disinformation not only from malicious foreign actors, but also from Americans themselves conducting such disinformation.

To put this urgent problem in bold relief, digital and social media platforms propel their spread like a dry bush wildfire.

False information and the spreading of propaganda have become very easy in our digital world. Weaponized disinformation is a veritable sleight of hand.

<https://ethicsdaily.com/digital-manipulation-sleight-of-hand-sleight-of-mind-part-1/> January 9, 2020 Elmo Familiaran

Its effects are insidious and largely undetected because they are designed to confirm, and easily fit into, pre-existing biases.

It's a sleight of mind because they are designed to mentally relocate our vantage point, so that our perspective of reality is also changed.

Neuroscientists have empirically demonstrated that the perception of reality by the brain's prefrontal cortex is toyed with when a complex problem is introduced in front of it.

The encounter with the complex problem creates an unexpected event in the prefrontal cortex that steals attention away from prevailing reality. The brain then lights up with distraction.

When you change the frame of the brain's perception, you change its perception of reality.

Diversion in order to deceive diverts us from the truth. That is the objective of the magician.

In these days of toxic partisan politics, magicians are aplenty.

As each political tribe casts aspersions against the other in the ideological arena of contested power, how can the truth-seeker navigate through the sea of moral casuistry when each antagonist in this power struggle claims to have the truth?

Is truth really that hard to find?

It has occurred to me, more acutely now than at any other time I can remember, that in this post-truth season of "alternative/contrived realities," people are being cast adrift from the moorings of a moral center.

How do we stay centered in these days?

I'll explore that question in tomorrow's follow-up column.

<https://ethicsdaily.com/digital-manipulation-sleight-of-hand-sleight-of-mind-part-1/> January 9, 2020 Elmo Familiaran

Editor's note: This is the first of a two-part series. Part two will appear tomorrow. A [version](#) of this article first appeared on Familiaran's [website](#). It is used with permission.