

Ontological (In)security: How Mind Gets “Hacked”?

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Abstract

In this short essay, we ask ourselves a question *how to “hack” one’s mind?* We turn to the fields of psychology and sociology and what they have to say about changing personal worldviews. In the first part of this paper, the concept of ontological security is introduced. In the second part, several options on what role it plays in the “hacking” of the mind and its prevention are presented. We conclude that the changing environment of today’s world threatens people’s feelings of ontological security, which makes them search for existential questions, often online. We suggest this ontological insecurity can be used by adversaries to “hack” one’s mind as well as methods to fight this threat. Our conclusions apply to the population in general as we see the rise of populism in the Czech Republic as well as worldwide as and result of “hacking” people’s minds in a figurative sense.

Introduction

In this short essay, we ask ourselves a question *how to “hack” one’s mind?* Since we do not believe it is possible to literally hack a mind using technological tools, we turn to the fields of psychology and sociology and what they have to say about changing personal worldviews. To do so, we use the concept of ontological security, which we introduce in the first part of this paper. In the second part, we give some options on what role it plays in the “hacking” of the mind and its prevention.

Our conclusions apply to the population in general as we see the rise of populism in the Czech Republic as well as worldwide as and result of “hacking” people’s minds in a figurative sense. Yet it can be applied to more specific groups of people, including the Army of the Czech Republic, where we see some disturbing trends in the past several years (e.g. *Hospodářské noviny*, 2015).

Ontological security

The concept of ontological security was originally coined by psychiatrist R. D. Laing in his study *The Divided Self*, where he defines the state of ontological security as feeling “real, alive, whole, and, in a temporal sense, a continuous person” (as cited in Gustafsson & Krickel-Choi, 2020, p. 881). The opposite is a feeling of ontological insecurity. Both those feelings are subjective and detached from reality: one does not need to be really under threat to feel ontologically insecure, and vice versa.

This term was later used by sociologist Anthony Giddens as he realized it has consequences not only for individuals but for society as a whole. According to Giddens, “to be ontologically secure is to possess, on the level of the unconscious and practical consciousness, ‘answers’ to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses” (Giddens, 1991, p. 47). It is “maintained when home is able to provide a site of constancy in the social and material environment,” when we maintain our subjective self-identity, or “consistent feeling of biographical continuity where the individual is able to sustain a narrative about the self and answer questions about doing, acting, and being” (Kinnvall, 2004, pp. 746-747).

Ontological security means to have trust in the world and people around us, based on our experience of the world as a coherent, stable, and dependable place. Once these expectations are violated, we might

lose trust in not only other people, but in the coherence of the world as a whole, we suddenly become strangers in the world we thought we knew, where we felt at home (Giddens, 1991, p. 67). Ontologically insecure people perceive their existence as constantly threatened by the world “out there” over which they feel to lose control (Gustafsson & Krickel-Choi, 2020, pp. 881-883).

Globalization and the loss of ontological security

Manuel Castells (2000, pp. 10-15) notices that we live in a world of the new economy. It is a global capitalist economy, in an ever more interconnected world, where many traditional anchors are threatened: states' sovereignty is questioned, politics has shrunk into simple targeted messages, many jobs are more unstable, and with the new communication technologies, culture is becoming unified. Even the understanding of time and space are fundamentally changing. These significant changes underline the instability of the globalizing world around us, deconstruct our subjective understandings of the world faster than we can reconstruct them, and leave us with the feeling of anxiety and ontological insecurity. These feelings of homelessness and social and economic insecurity lead many people to reject the system they live in and replace them with others.

When globalization in this way dissolves system and routines people are used to live in and by, be it the governments' autonomy (their ability to control and define states) or the role of the patriarchal family, people react by attempts to anchor themselves. They do so by recreating their identities, usually by redeveloping local allegiances, historical memories, and religious affiliations (Castells, 2010, p. 69), thus the nationalistic and religious fundamentalist worldviews with clear and simple answers help people to recreate their sense of belonging and identity. In Kinnvall's words, “going back to an imagined past by using reconstructed symbols and cultural reference points is, in other words, a response to the destabilizing effects of changing patterns of global mobility and migration. It is an attempt to recreate a lost sense of security” (2004, p. 744). In addition to this, Michael Skey (2010, p. 721) suggests that the significance of the taken-for-granted sense of identity (in his case national) is strongest when under threat, in his case the English realize they are English when they feel their Englishness is threatened.

The appeal of nationalisms and religious fundamentalisms around the globe in the past several decades is a direct answer to the growing feelings of ontological insecurity among people. Populism is a soft and unsuccessful part of this story (e.g. Steele & Homolar, 2019, pp. 214-216). Terrorism is a much more dangerous result, be it the “lone wolf” attacks such as Jaromír Balda, the Isla Vista massacre, Christchurch shooting, or others, or more organized forms such as Daesh or American militias. What connects these phenomena besides their attempt to recreate the feeling of ontological security is their online form of communication. The freedom of the Internet presents people with never-ending amounts of “alternative facts” and conspiracy theories helping them to recreate their feeling of ontological security (Wood, 2013, p. 33). Moreover, these information (unlike the quality ones) are for free. We will close this part with words from Christchurch mass murderer's manifesto: “From where did you receive/research/develop your beliefs? – The internet, of course. You will not find the truth anywhere else” (Tarrant, 2019, p. 17).

Individual consequences

According to A. Maslow, the need for safety and „belonging” is one of the most basic human needs (Nolen-Hoeksema, Frederickson, Loftus, & Wagenaar, 2012, p. 565). An individual cannot advance to higher levels of needs (e.g. personal growth) until lower levels are satisfied. An individual suffering from hunger cannot satisfy a need for safety or belonging, because those are placed on a higher level of the pyramid. At the

same time, deficiency in the gratification of a need produces psychological tension, slowly leading to a state of long-term frustration, if not being satisfied. This is a state of permanent discomfort, which the individual attempts to eliminate, reaching for more desperate measures, the greater the duration or intensity of that state, often leading to direct violence or acts of aggression (Janošová, Kollerová, Zábrodská, Kressa, & Dědová, 2016, p. 93f).

This, on a psychological level, supports the above-mentioned thesis about individuals using often controversial, even threatening ways to cope with the loss of ontological security. An individual suffering from a long-term frustration and seeking some “universal”, yet accessible way to rebuild his sense of belonging is very vulnerable and susceptible to all sorts of manipulation. This and the fact that a significant amount of interactions is happening online is a perfect opportunity to literary “hack” a person’s mind. It almost seems, as if the only “know-how” in this area is the capability to present one’s ideas in a way accessible to the frustrated seeker, easy enough in the “wild” environment of social networks and online media.

The proteus effect developed by Nick Yee & Jeremy Bailenson (2007) describes the relationship between an individual’s representation in a virtual space and that in the real world. According to this theory, unlimited options of presenting oneself online, with little to no responsibility for one’s behaviour, allow the user to create any kind of identity he desires. First, this could bring the frustrated individual the lost feeling of belonging back, in a sense, that he may identify with whom or what he pleases, second, Yee and Bailenson claim there is certain reciprocity in the virtual-real relation: once a brand new “online self” is created, it changes the real self until the difference is barely noticeable. In this case, the “hacking” is only a question of shaping the virtual alter-ego to the desired form and its real owner will “wire” himself up on his own.

The Offense

The battle will be fought for access to the troubled individual. The best weapon is the capability to make certain views appear as “the correct views”. The ontologically insecure individual presented with a suitable and attractive alternative will not only gladly accept it but will also do what is in his power to actively transform himself into the desired form. This can be quite easily achieved in a virtual space. If vulnerable, the human psyche can be “hacked” by its very nature, with relatively small effort.

The Defense

The Proteus effect operates regardless of the valence of potential input. That the virtual alter-ego potentially shapes its real owner into a new, different person is not a threat by itself. It is only as dangerous as the idea the virtual alter-ego identified itself with. But there is also a certain potential for “positive” shaping. However, here we see one major obstacle: the state of ontological insecurity includes distrust in the system and fear of the outside world. To regain the trust of individuals experiencing an ontological crisis might prove problematic. A possibility is to make the ideas and principles of the “state before” more appealing and accessible than those being used as surrogates (fundamentalism, nationalism, etc.).

Another defensive strategy is to build up an individual psychological resilience. Psychological resilience may be described as a “positive adaptation when facing adversity” (Kunicki & Harlow, 2020, p. 330). In our case, the adversity leads to the state of ontological insecurity. One of the pillars of resilience is education. The pre-election study from 2019 shows the lower the education, the higher the chance of a

person to vote for a nationalist or populist movements (MEDIAN, 2019). P. Zimbardo and N. D. Coulomb (2017) see the solution in setting higher criteria and standards for teachers. They also claim that more educated individuals are less prone to manipulation of any kind: lower education means lower resilience and a higher probability of ontological insecurity. Further ways to build up resilience include building up a sense of self-worth. This could be achieved by guaranteeing attractive part-time jobs for young people and students through state-administered programs (Ibid., p. 164). A certain potential can be seen in activities using the system of „learning situations“ to school children and young adults. In this system, the participants are presented with situations meeting certain criteria, that allow them to „take a peek“ at certain social qualities and allow them to learn specific social skills that closely relate to personal growth. This system is being actively researched by one of the authors of this text.

Conclusion

Our essay attempts to answer the question *how to “hack” one’s mind?* from a perspective of psychology and sociology, using the theory of ontological security. We conclude that the changing environment of today’s world threatens people’s feelings of ontological security, which makes them search for existential questions, often online. We suggest this ontological insecurity can be used by adversaries to “hack” one’s mind as well as methods to fight this threat.

While we offer some answers, we believe this essay brings up more questions. The role of the Internet in the whole process seems to be obvious, yet we believe it should be examined further. Better education is not the sole answer: many extremists worldwide are often well-educated people (e.g. the 9/11 attackers, many Aum Shinrikyo members). However, many of them had technical or business education, not fully understanding social developments: perhaps the fear of the unknown played role in their radicalization and better education in social sciences might have prevented it. These are only a few questions this paper rises and which we believe need further research to fully understand how the mind can be “hacked”.

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