

Cass Sunstein was invested as a member of the American Academy of Sciences and Letters in 2024.

In [this video](#), Academy Executive Director Greg Forster interviews Prof. Sunstein about how academic inquiry is being affected by new forms of manipulation in the social environment of social media and AI, and the need to cultivate intellectual agency.

Greg Forster, American Academy of Sciences and Letters

I'm Greg Forster with the American Academy of Sciences and Letters, and today I'm interviewing Academy member Cass Sunstein of Harvard Law School, who is also the author of the recent book, *Manipulation*. Cass, thank you so much for joining us.

Cass Sunstein, Harvard Law School

Well, thanks to you. A pleasure to be here.

Forster

The mission of our Academy is open inquiry and the rational pursuit of knowledge in the university, and that means we are against manipulation when it happens in the classroom or as part of the university community. Your book argues we need fresh thinking about what manipulation is and even a new definition of it. So tell us, why is that needed?

Sunstein

We're in an era in which, with the rise of AI, algorithms, social media, there's particular capacity to manipulate people. Algorithms and AI provide fantastic benefits to people all around the world and in our country. So do social media platforms, but it's also possible to manipulate people to engage, let's say, with social media for hours and hours and hours. It's also possible to manipulate people to give up their time and their money in ways that maybe don't make their lives go better, but potentially worse.

Forster

How would you define “manipulation”? Your book addresses our lack of a conceptual framework for thinking about what it is. How would you define it?

Sunstein

I should say parenthetically that I worked on the book for 15 years, and if people don't like the book or don't find it convincing, I'll be so sad and dispirited, and my self-image will take a hit, and I have two children and two dogs, and I don't know how I'll be able to cope, really. That was an act of manipulation right there. Manipulation is a form of trickery that fails to treat people with respect as capable of reflective and deliberative choice. If you tell people that if they don't like your book or find your argument convincing, you're going to be so sad and so distressed, then you aren't respecting their capacity to make their own choices.

Forster

I remember I once said that the goal of rhetoric, or that is, persuasive speech, is not to get the other person to do what you want, but rather to give them a sympathetic understanding of what your argument is, so they can make a choice.

I'd like to zero in on the university now. We've been speaking broadly about manipulation, but how is the university in particular being affected by this new environment, and what do scholars and educators need to be thinking about?

Sunstein

We need first to have clarity on what manipulation is and why it's bad. In economics departments, people are typically focused on human welfare and well-being. How can we help people to have better lives? Economic growth is really important for that, and sensible choices are also really important for that. In psychology departments, we're thinking about the human mind in universities, and there have been fantastic advances in psychological circles about when we depart from perfect rationality and when maybe our imperfections can be exploited. In law schools, which is my principal home, universities focus not shockingly on law and legal protections. There are property rights, which are essential to many good things. There are rights to freedom of contract, which make the economy hum when things are going well, as let's hope they generally are. We have protections for innovators. We have protections for freedom of religion, so if people want to worship one god that other people don't quite think is the real god, then they are still protected. Maybe they can be converted. That's what free speech authorizes.

This is a spectrum of things that are studied in various departments. Manipulation, to get clear on it, is super important. It's a cousin to lies and deception. Our legal systems and our psychology departments and our economics departments made phenomenal progress in getting clear on these things and ultimately in regulating them. So we have regulators, and no one really jumps for joy when hearing the word "regulators," but they help make economies go and help protect people against fraud. That's very good to do, to protect people against fraud.

We need universities to focus on the risk of manipulation. Some of it shouldn't be controlled by law. If you have algorithms that are very aware of each individual's vulnerability, you can exploit that to manipulate people into buying things. It may be that the right response is by disclosing it and by using social norms, not through the legal system, but it might be that the legal system is the place to go. In both Europe and North America, there have been developments that are designed to counteract manipulation, as, for example, by saying, if it's really easy to form an economic relationship with someone, it ought to be easy to extricate yourself from it. Because one form of manipulation is, here you are, you have a service, you make one click, and it's your service, and you pay a monthly fee. Then after three months, you think, I don't like this very much, it's a lot of money. But to get out of it takes a visit to a place that's far and inconvenient, meetings, repeated encounters. You might think, well, I don't like paying that much every month, but it's a lot of trouble to get out of it.

Forster

Scholars and educators largely think about AI in terms of students using it surreptitiously to complete their assignments. But what I hear you suggesting is the larger cultural environment of AI and

algorithms and social media actually forces us to rethink the basic mission of each of the disciplines in the university. What do these disciplines exist to do and why? It strikes me that there are schools of thought in all the major divisions of the university that are comfortable with manipulation and maybe would be challenged by a rethink that centers the need for agency and freedom.

Sunstein

What I like to think about economics departments, and I have a connection with ours, is that freedom and choice tend to be central, at least in English-speaking universities, and freedom can be compromised by forbidding people from doing things, also by defrauding people, also by manipulating people. That can compromise freedom. We're seeing some work in economics departments about manipulation and what's wrong with it. Some very cool work by economists talks about product traps, and this is the part of the book that I actually enjoyed most. People can be manipulated into a situation in which they buy something, not because they like it, but because if they don't buy it, they'll be left out.

This is really university research of a sterling kind. University students would demand a lot of money to be off social media for a month, like \$50, \$100. But if they're asked, how much would you demand to be off for a month if everyone else in your group is off? They say, oh, then I'd pay you. This is empirical research that shows that college students really crave being on, in this case, TikTok and Instagram, but a lot of them wish TikTok and Instagram weren't in their lives and that of their peers. This is economics work, it also has psychological resonance, it has clear legal implications, and really frontiers work. In philosophy departments, there's been some very good work trying to figure out what manipulation is. It's hard to define that concept, and I spent a lot of time fussing on the book with the help of very distinguished philosophers.

Forster

I think the goodness of freedom presupposes a concept of agency that people are exercising, and what I hear you suggesting is that means freedom is not only compromised by formal constraints, such as laws that forbid people to do things, but also by social conditions that take their agency away from them. One thing that leads to our Academy is we're devoted to open inquiry and the rational pursuit of truth because we think it's good for people. We have a concept of what is good for human beings that includes things like inquiry, and your book also explicitly grounds itself in an argument that certain things are good for people, and that manipulation is bad because it doesn't accord with this vision of what is good for people. In many ways, we're back to Socrates's question, what is good? This shouldn't be controversial, right? Does anybody want to be trapped forever in endless dopamine cycles? I guess your evidence shows that they do, but reflectively, would they want to? Does anyone read Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and say, well, this is what I want, sign me up for this future. Why is it so hard to hold on to our humanity?

Sunstein

I thank you for the reference to agency. Agency is actually the hero of the book, and this is meant to be appealing to a lot of different parts of the Western tradition. You could be a Kantian who thinks that people should be treated with respect and as ends, not means, and see manipulation as a problem for that reason. You could be a utilitarian and think that people generally know if they like chocolate or instead vanilla, or they know if they like coffee, they know if they like studying, they know if they like athletics

and let them figure it out. That's a way of respecting agency. If you manipulate them, you bypass their own distinctive knowledge about what's best for their lives. That's kind of the utilitarian claim for agency. There are other reasons that might be Greek, they might be Roman to respect agency.

So the idea that agency is important we can take as bedrock, though, for different reasons. Manipulation is, in a way, an unknown territory, not in the sense of this unfamiliar word, but in the sense that we know much less than we should about what it is exactly, what's wrong with it, and what to do about it. The reason I spent 15 years on this project is that this unknown territory is extremely fundamental. It relates to some scientific findings in neuroscience about the human brain. For example, we know that if you think about yourself in the next weeks and months, some part of the brain is going to light up. If you think about yourself a year from now or two years from now, there's some chance that part of the brain won't light up. That's because when some people think of their current self, it's very vivid and personal. When they think of their future self, not so much. That means that for those people, their future self is neurologically a stranger. People who are like that, which is a lot of humanity, can be manipulated to harm that future stranger, who's actually them.

Forster

If you think about the wisdom traditions around the world, one of the things they all have in common is encouraging you to think about the long term. Don't just do what feels good in the moment, but think about yourself years from now. Think about your children and grandchildren. What choices do you want to make now so your grandchildren inherit a better world? That's not, to put it mildly, central to the current discourse on TikTok.

Sunstein

I'm very concerned about social media platforms for a host of reasons informed by contemporary behavioral science, one of which is this product trap idea. Another is the addictive character of social media. Another is that the business model for social media platforms, and there are many good things that they do, has to do with maximizing engagement. One thing we know from behavioral science of the last 20 years is that people's nonreflective choices might actually make their lives go worse. They know that, if they're given a chance to give a fact to the better angels of their natures.

Forster

So much to think about raising the basic questions about what it means to be human. Cass Sunstein, thank you so much for being with us.

Sunstein

Thank you for having me. Great pleasure.