

Is Google Mood Manipulation Ethical?

It's a bit like hijacking somebody's brain, really. If, through your art, you invade somebody's emotional state and change it, so that they feel something about your art, instead of about their current real-life circumstances, you're manipulating them. It's unarguable. You've taken command of their attention and consequently, you can level their blood pressure up or down, make them feel inappropriately hopeful or else unrealistically despairing, or you can turn them on and arouse them, when that has nothing to do with their current surroundings.

Artists use their art to create emotionally affective experiences. That's what they do and they do it deliberately. Art is meant to reach you, emotionally and touch you deeply. The best art always does and we enjoy art which has this power, in the main. We have a preference for it. In a sense, artists are manipulators of mood. It's quite a potent ability and using it unwisely or maliciously can have unforeseen consequences. Murders have been committed because some piece of art or other compelled a madman to act on impulse. Granted, it might not have been the root cause, but art is often a contributory factor.

During the great depression, the playing of "Buddy, Can You Spare a Dime?" was discouraged, because it was thought to lead to swathes of suicides. It does beg the question: when is it right and ethical to manipulate the mood of an audience and when is it not?

Advertisers and propagandists will tell you that they're manipulating the mood and emotional state of an audience for a higher good, but what is that higher good? Is it to shore up unearned, illegitimate privilege, to milk people of their money or support, for causes they would not ordinarily support? Are they being led to act against their own interests? Is it to change their minds about the observable facts, so that they enter into a fantasy hallucination, which whitewashes reality, rather than trusting their own senses?

Advertising exists because of a belief that you can manipulate people into buying something they don't actually want or need and often cannot afford, relative to more worthwhile calls on their spending. Is that ethical? Should artists participate in and contribute to this assault on reason?

When is it good or acceptable for an artist to affect the mood of other people? I think this is an important question, which goes to the very heart of our humanity. If you have a strength, should you use that strength to dominate and control, conquering all in your wake, or should you use it to protect and safeguard those that lack it? When you hijack somebody's emotional state and change it, through your art, don't you owe them a duty of care to do no harm, in that act?

In the jaws of abject misery, should you make people feel unrealistically happy and accepting of it, or should you show it back to them, in vivid detail, at the risk of making them feel even more miserable than they already are? When people are content and satisfied, should you induce insecurities about their acceptability and their prospects, so that they worry unnecessarily about things that don't matter and buy products to solve their newly perceived (and wholly manufactured) problems?

Before advertising, there was no such thing as halitosis or body odour. Of course, there was, but nobody felt like a social pariah for having wholly human aspects to their existence. We're animals, after all, prone to bacterial invasion of our mouth cavities and arm pits. Now, we've been manipulated to believe in pure denial – that only the unfortunates have bad breath and sweaty underarms. We're invited to believe that the best people don't and that in order to join them, we must pay money to a beneficent manufacturer who has, fortunately for us, created a temporary solution to this dreaded problem. The bacteria haven't seen those ads.

Is it right to let advertisers, through their art forms, made by artists, assert that your beautiful girlfriend or wife is ugly, unsightly, inadequate and less than human? Should she spend her days in

guilt and angst, worrying about her cellulite and less than perfect bosoms? Will she come to believe, through those manipulations, that she is less than a real woman unless she disguises her features with paints and unguents, applied directly to a very delicate and vital organ, her skin?

Most popular music encourages a lifestyle of debauched excess and rampant promiscuity, but is it realistic or even possible to live such a life, without foreshortening it prematurely? If we felt the way the totality of our art, to date, encourages us to feel, how would we feel? Would we believe we lived in a violent world which cannot be changed, where all disputes are settled at the point of a gun and where intellect and rational debate are seen as stupid weaknesses and vulnerabilities that must be exploited by stronger people, willing to assert their macho personas? Would we believe there is no alternative and that our helplessness is absolute? Would we lose touch with our agency and our ability to shape the world into a better thing?

Are we also in danger of inducing manipulation fatigue? Have people been so mood altered, for so long, by so many other people, that we've become numb to it and everything else? Has it caused us to lose any sense of who we are, what we really want and of how we would ideally live a fulfilling and satisfying life, as opposed to one that requires us to live in constant fear of violent reprisal for any transgression from orthodoxy? Have we been so manipulated, to saturation point, that we've lost the ability to even see it?

Is it right to so fatigue people's emotional responses that they become desensitised to things they really ought to react to, in a healthy, emotional way? Do we rob people of their empathy and ability to care about important things, if we bombard their emotions with demands to change, on our command and whim, for no worthwhile reason? Is mood altering in a capricious way actually just causing everybody to become insensate, in aggregate? Do we want to create a population of unfeeling robots?

Go into any retail store and you're subjected to mood music. It's meant to prime you for purchasing. People are harvesting your emotional state all the time, with a view to manipulating it in their favour. Just the way you interact with a touch screen (haptic signatures) can reveal a lot about how you're feeling. Facebook and others are patenting techniques for using the violence or passivity in your touch screen gestures to target ads at you, meant to exploit your current emotional state, or catch you at moment when you are susceptible to having a mood induced. They don't just change the ads, to match your mood; they change the content of your timeline, knowing that you will react in certain ways to selected content – selected by them to change how you feel. You are being manipulated without you even being aware of the manipulation and it's at a colossal, previously unimaginable scale.

As an artist, it's important to ask yourself if you are manipulating mood to exploit a person, without their consent and awareness, or to nurture their growth, contributing to their well-being and ability to thrive. If you take responsibility for nothing else, in this world, you at least have to take responsibility for that. Do you entertain the mindset that your audience is yours to experiment with, psychologically, whether or not they consent, like some kind of freely available resource, or do you believe you owe them a greater duty of care, as fellow humans? Do you provide them with the ability to engage in your emotional manipulation, with informed consent and do they have the ability to opt out, rather than having it imposed upon them (like advertising often is). Is your opt-out deal a realistic option, or is there a punishment attached to not playing? Are you offering everything on a take it or leave it basis, with no real option of being left alone, emotionally? Does your artistic, emotional manipulation rely on deception or stealth for its impact?

There was an outcry when it was discovered that Facebook was deliberately and surreptitiously manipulating mood as a giant psychological experiment. People were rightfully dismayed and highly vocal in their disapproval. Everybody, except Facebook, intuitively felt it was wrong. Now, Facebook simply invites you to

volunteer your emotional reactions, through those cute little emojis that come up when you hover over “Like”, so that they can mood match advertising and content to your self-reported emotional state, when you are, by your own admission, most open and receptive to their messages.

What if the message is to keep you enslaved in a fictional version of reality, which through your acceptance becomes your actual reality, where someone else is your master and you are their captive slave?

What if you are made to vote “leave” or “remain” through sheer mood manipulation, rather than facts or any rational analysis of what’s actually best? The big data analytics technology exists to overwhelm your free choice and to manipulate you every which way, using your emotions against you. Is that something you want to participate in propagating and upholding, as an artist?

Artist: are you an open, honest, authentic, trustworthy affecter of emotions or a bloody sociopath? What’s it to be?

Artists, in being able to influence the emotional states of their audiences, wield an uncommon and potent super power over the rest of humanity. They need to be careful and ethical in how they use it. Mind how you go.