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THIS IS YOUR BRAIN ON FACEBOOK: AN ANALYTICAL APPROACH TO SOCIAL MEDIA AND AUTONOMY

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In this research, I will examine the ethics of data-mining and microtargeting by social media (SM). When you click the like button, follow an influencer, or browse the Facebook marketplace, your online activity creates digital traces. This behavioral imprint is your data, the extraction and recording of that information is data mining. Once your behavioral pattern is detected, a psychological profile is created that helps to predict what you will do next. The practice of predictive modeling is then used to target people with curated information: microtargeting. Why is there a need to assess the ethical value of these processes? Data mining and microtargeting inhibits our ability to act as autonomous moral agents. Autonomy is a requirement for fully responsible and free moral action. An action is free if the agent alone controls it, and there is no external manipulation. SM has a way of influencing what our choices are. Consider this: when you open YouTube and look at the recommendation list, is it not similar to what you watched last time? YouTube, like other SM companies, examines your previous history (data) and discovers patterns about your online choices. YouTube then uses these patterns to assess what you would like to watch next and choose the next video for you. It seems innocuous, but actually a lot more extensive than just what videos you might enjoy. It has consequences for how you view the world and the next choices you make. The process of shaping, reinforcing, and manipulating your preferences modifies your behavior. The sole purpose of behavior modification is to regulate how and what you think. If you cannot self-regulate, you are not an autonomous agent.