Worksheet for Moran Cerf | Hacking into Our Thoughts and Dreams (Episode 265)

What can someone who used to rob banks tell you about the science of hacking humans and the limits of social engineering? Our guest today has that answer. **Moran Cerf** is a neuroscientist and business professor at the Kellogg School of Management and the neuroscience program at Northwestern University. He is the founder of Think-Alike and B-Cube and the host and curator of PopTech, one of the top five leading conferences in the world.

If his name sounds familiar, you might remember a media frenzy a few years back surrounding a process whereby dreams could be recorded with existing technology — and it was a huge misunderstanding. Still, this slip-up did bring Moran and his work to the attention of the mainstream — but will it bring us any closer to *actually* recording dreams? On this episode we'll discuss the current state of this technology, what a future in which we can upload our thoughts into the cloud might look like, the security issues this would present as the criminal element works hard to hack into these thoughts, and much more.

Don't Believe Everything You Think

We can already be convinced to question our memory of events when presented with bogus "evidence" created by deepfake technology that can mimic our words and actions with spooky accuracy — and this technology is only going to get better. So how will we navigate a future in which we can't even trust ourselves?

"The solution in two words: April Fools'," says Moran. "What I used to tell my friends as a joke, but based on the hacking world, is that 'I'm surprised that April Fools' is the only day of the year that we can be actually skeptical.' In April Fools', if your wife comes to you and says, 'Hey, this is what I'm doing," you say, 'I don't know. I know her and I know that this is not something that she would actually do, so let me think about it.' Otherwise, you just trust everything. It's a funny kind of idea that you suddenly start to vet everything, but this is how we should be."

Are you someone who falls for April Fools' jokes and hoaxes every year? If every day were April Fools' Day, what questions could you ask yourself to skeptically filter out that day's fictions from facts? Who would you trust — and not trust — in such a world?

Assume You're Already Hacked

Moran says: "If hackers would be asked, 'What should we do to prevent someone getting into our system?' They will tell you, 'You can't.' The only way to respond is to assume that you already have been hacked."

If you assume the worst has already happened, you can skip the pesky protocols of prevention and get right to recovery. If we're talking about your computer being hacked, you can change your passwords often (or use a password manager), check your outgoing email to make sure someone hasn't been sending bogus correspondence on your behalf, and just avoid leaving potentially embarrassing documents, images, or browsing history around for others to discover. If we're talking about your brain being hacked — your perception of reality manipulated to make you believe you've said or done something you haven't — you can use your aforementioned April Fools' skepticism and ensure that you have a core of friends you can rely on to corroborate reality.

In what ways can you be hacked? What secrets do you generally hope to keep from others? In what ways would you behave differently in a world without secrets — where privacy is no longer something you can reasonably expect?

Trusting Strange Computers

Moran's research has shown us that it's possible to map emotions in the human brain in a way that allows computers to read what we're feeling and predict where those feelings lead — even before the human subject knows. And chips in our brains could allow us to outsource certain thought processes so we can connect dots and arrive at conclusions more efficiently without much conscious effort. A movie studio might use this technology to chart multiple endings to a film and reroute toward the one that's most satisfactory based on the current audience's emotional responses. It might be used in classrooms to monitor whether or not information is being absorbed by students and adjust the experience to be optimally effective. Similarly, we can be matched with medical professionals whose bedside manners more closely align with our own preferences.

On the dark side of things, such technology might be used by a company to better hawk its wares or a totalitarian government to keep its population placated and programmed with state-serving propaganda.

How would you apply technology that could accurately read the direction of someone's emotional currents, or chips that could upgrade our thought processes to be more accurate and effortless? What do you see as the potential benevolent uses and malevolent abuses of such technology?

"Please Laugh Now."

Moran is often told he speaks fast, which was especially challenging for a translator who was tasked with conveying one of his lectures to a Japanese audience a few years ago. But in this case, it wasn't so much the speed of his speech that didn't translate well, but the jokes he was trying to tell. So when the first joke didn't quite land, further jokes prompted the translator to simply say, "The speaker just told a joke. Please laugh." During the speech, Moran thought he was killing it; it wasn't until later that the translator confessed her benevolent deception. Is Moran ultimately glad he found out the truth, or would he have been happier being left in the dark?

"I find it amusing," says Moran. "I have the strategy that says like, good stories happen to those who can tell them. If something happens that's embarrassing and so on, immediately tell a story about it publicly. That's helping you resolve."

What amusing anecdotes do you have from your own life that arose from similar misunderstandings? Are you usually glad to find out a situation was actually much different behind the scenes than how it seemed to play out in the moment, or do you prefer blissful ignorance?

Friendly Favor

We've all heard some variation of the famous Jim Rohn saying that we are the average of the five people with whom we spend the most time. In other words, you're doing yourself more of a favor by hanging out with scientists, authors, teachers, and people who frequently use their brain power to get things done than you are by hanging out with couch potatoes who smoke pot all day and never see daylight unless it's to answer the door for the pizza guy.

"If you have a behavior that you say you want to change, the best way to do it is to find people that exhibit the behavior that you want and be next to them," says Moran " Don't ask them "How do you do it?" Don't try to learn it. Just be next to them. Your brain will adopt those signals over time."

Are there people in your circle of friends who improve your thoughts and behavior just by being in close proximity, or do your closest friends tend to drag you down? Take a minute to audit the time you spend with friends of both flavor and make a conscious effort to include more of the positive and less of the negative.


Agree to Disagree

But in addition to surrounding ourselves with people who are good at the things we'd like to improve about ourselves, we also want to hang out with people who differ from us if we want a fuller, more accurate view of reality than the one offered by remaining in a bubble with like-minded thinkers.

"Stories and communication are the best way to checks and balances [over the] creation of your own ideas," says Moran. "You bring people and you tell them your ideas. You voice them. You look at their response. You hear their views. You get the best way to analyze and process your own ideas. If you just think about them yourself and you don't share them, you don't broadcast them, you will be confined to your echo chamber. If you only talk to the same people that you talk to all the time, you will get a bigger but still small chamber. The more you are exposed to other views, you will actually refine your ideas."

We all know people with whom we disagree. Rarer are the people with whom we disagree but can still maintain civil discourse — that's the sweet spot. Try to step outside of your comfort bubble and interact regularly with people in this category — it'll do both of you some good.
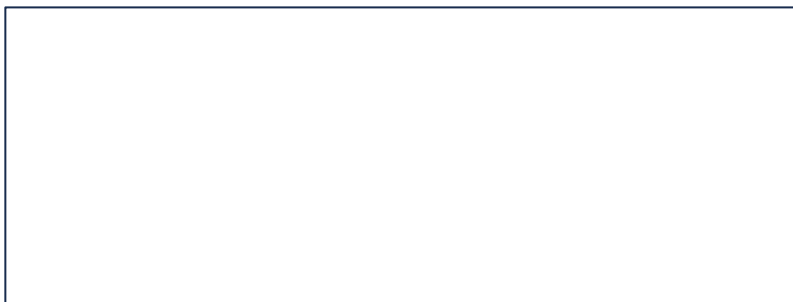
"Why?" Is the Enemy

Research has shown that we can be prompted to persuade ourselves of the validity of choices that are made for us — even more powerfully than we believe in the choices we make for ourselves. For instance, if you're shopping for toothpaste and decide to buy Crest over Colgate, but someone sneaks over to your cart and switches your Crest with Colgate before checkout, you'll probably just accept it and buy the Colgate. If that person confronts you outside and asks you why you chose Colgate over Crest, you're likely to create a story that reinforces the purchase of Colgate as your decision. And then the next time you go to buy toothpaste, Colgate is most likely to be "your" natural choice.

"If I just replace the two options and I give you one, you will take it, but you will leave home and, tomorrow, you're going to choose the first thing again. You wouldn't change," says Moran "By asking you why, I make you reflect on the choice that you didn't make and create associations for that new option, which actually then solidifies it in your brain. By asking someone why, you make them think and be confident in their answer."

In retrospect, how has someone asking you "why?" manipulated you into accepting something that wouldn't normally be your first choice? Now that you're aware of this very human vulnerability, how will you keep a closer ear out for telling the difference between your own choices and choices that are being made for you?

Rehearse Positive Outcomes

Moran had a practical that we didn't quite get to on the show, so here it is in a nutshell: We need to rehearse positive outcomes. When we think of something we're scared of, for example, public speaking, you imagine failing. You imagine people laughing. But that anchors that activity to that negative feeling. Instead, rehearse yourself killing it, crushing it. You don't do this normally because you probably feel like an arrogant jerk, but you should rehearse positive outcomes at least two to three times as much as you rehearse negative outcomes. Why don't we do this? Because we don't want to look like schmoes even in our own mind, but we've got to create this habit.

When something negative pops up in your mind — a negative visualization — visualize the opposite and then do it again and again and again. What are your most common negative visualizations, and what might they look like if, instead, their outcomes were positive?

Full show notes and resources for this episode [can be found here](#).

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