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## NUDGED TO LEARN OR TRAINED TO OBEY: THE ATTENTION ECONOMY IN EDTECH

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### INTRODUCTION:

In the era of algorithms that determine the way people shop, how they think about their political preferences, education is not an exception. The emergence of EdTech-education and technology with its claims of customizable, accessible at scale and efficient education has transformed the classroom into a clickable interface. However, behind the shiny user interface, there is a question that carries a deeper meaning: are students being manipulated in order to learn or are they being unconsciously trained to comply?

Central to this controversy is the attention economy, whereby human attention is the greatest currency in this economy. Platforms in the EdTech space prefer applying behavioral psychology tools, such as gamification, positive reinforcing strategies, visual stimuli, etc., in order to attract and maintain the student interest. On the one hand, these tools boast of increased motivation and better results, however on the other, they can turn education into a kind of an obedient robot response.

### BEHAVIOURAL NUDGES OR BEHAVIOURAL CONTROL?

The idea of nudging popularized by Thaler and Sunstein in their work on the behavioural economics is that the possibility to lead people towards sound choices can be built into a system and that this will not imply any loss of freedom of choice.<sup>1</sup> In EdTech, it is achieved by measuring progress through the use of progress bars, push notifications and rewards (badges, stars, streaks) that promote learners exhibiting a consistent learning behavior.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard H. Thaler & Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, And Happiness* (unbar. Ed. Yale Univ. Press 2008).

However, the boundary that exists between nudging and manipulation is very narrow. When algorithms take advantage of the knowledge gained via cognitive biases such as variable rewards (dopamine hits), fear of missing out (FOMO), or social comparison, it turns not into learning but into compliance. The goal is changing to involvement measures instead of education. The student turns into a user and the learning platform becomes just another attention-seeking app.

This behavioural conditioning is alarmingly similar to what has been termed by psychologists as, operant conditioning where users are conditioned by reward and punishment.<sup>2</sup> There is nothing about curiosity or adventure anymore; it is about clicking the right button to get validated. The platform does not only teach topic; it instructs subtly on how to behave in a data-driven architecture.

### **WHO'S THE LEARNER AND WHO'S THE PRODUCT?**

The majority of EdTech platforms operate on data driven models. Every single click, pause, incorrect answer, and completed module contributes to the system, allows improving the product and customizing user experience. However, this data does not only concern improving pedagogy, it is monetized, sold, or used to train machine learning models.

Once education sites start to resemble social media in the way they attract attention, boundaries start to become muffled. Do these sites promote intellectual independence of a student or are they trying to influence their behavior to their model of business? When retention should be the main purpose, instead of reflection, education becomes performative.

Also, the protection of data turns into a significant ethical fault line. Minors and other students hardly give an informed consent. They do not necessarily gather their biometric measures (analysis of the eye tracking, voice analysis), their behavioural status and their psychometric profile, with any observable policy.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, the students do not only become students, they also become a product.

### **THE LEGAL VACUUM:**

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<sup>2</sup> B.F. Skinner, *The Behavior of Organisms: An Experimental Analysis* (B.F. Skinner Found. 1938).

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Dep't of Educ., *Protecting Student Privacy While Using Online Education Services: Model Terms of Service* (Jan 2015) available at: [https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/sites/default/files/resource\\_document/file/TOS\\_Guidance\\_Mar2016.pdf](https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/sites/default/files/resource_document/file/TOS_Guidance_Mar2016.pdf)

In most jurisdictions, the development of digital learning platforms has not yet been completely reconciled with the education law. Conventional models are based on access to education, education quality and equity in the education system- but EdTech brings about legal issues:

- Who owns the learning data?
- Is constant surveillance through proctoring violation of privacy?
- Can algorithm be biased?

Although global protection such as the GDPR exists in places such as the EU, India is progressing towards a Digital Personal Data Protection Act, there is legal ambiguity in specifically protecting the educational data of children.<sup>4</sup> Then there is the problem of algorithmic transparency--can students and educators know how and why the EdTech platform is making some pedagogical decisions?

### **LEARNING AUTONOMY OR DIGITAL DISCIPLINE?**

At its most optimistic, EdTech can eradicate like-gatekeeping in education; high-quality training will be available regardless of social classes. However, in the absence of active governance and moral handrails, it may have the reverse effect: imposing strict learning channels, penalizing non-engagement and creating students who are submissive instead of inquisitive.

As an example, systems that reward and punish students on the basis of activity do not consider learning differences, psychological challenges, or family disparities. By doing so they make digital discipline a habit, training people to be obedient to systems rather than pursue knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

Teachers are also quite frequently relegated to the role of data entry operators, where they are required to observe dashboards instead of fostering inquiry. Teaching turns into measurements. The spirit of education, which is critical thinking, moral imagination, dialectical thinking, is lost in the feed.<sup>6</sup>

### **CONCLUSION:**

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<sup>4</sup> The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, No. 22 of 2023, §4, Acts of Parliament, 2023 (India), Available at: <https://www.meity.gov.in/static/uploads/2024/06/2bf1f0e9f04e6fb4f8fef35e82c42aa5.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Natasha Singer, How Google Took over the Classroom, *N.Y. Times* (May 13, 2017) <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/13/technology/google-education-chromebooks-schools.html>

<sup>6</sup> Selwyn, N. (2019). *Should robots replace teachers? AI and the Future of Education*. (1<sup>st</sup> ed.) Polity Press.

Whether EdTech is good or bad is not the question, but who owns it, its design and what values it promotes. Behavioural nudges are potentially useful when not used to fulfil the needs of engagement algorithms. Not analytics, but autonomy, equity, and mental well-being should be priorities of education.

We need to pose this question to ourselves as learners, parents, educators and policymakers, and intellectuals; are we asking students to think freely or to serve platforms?

The regulatory forums need to go further and consider Edtech more than tools, they are players in an educational ecosystem with actual influence over how learning gets organized, assessed, and internalized. And with great power go great responsibilities.