



Cap this!

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It seems that I am so informationally overloaded these days that I missed a new and fascinating field of study. The term *captology* would not in itself have caught my eye if I had come across it, if it wasn't for Fogg's groundbreaking work on the use of computers to change human behaviour. If it is beginning to sound like *1984*, please don't fret – things could be worse by far without computers. *Captology*, as it turns out, stands for *(C)omputers (A)s (P)ersuasion (T)echnology* and studies 'the design, research and analysis of interactive computing products created for the purpose of changing people's attitudes.'

I have to admit that much else of what is in the book made me incredulous. Agreed, I am aware of a few of my colleagues who kiss their LCD screens when an e-mail with an exceptionally well paid contract comes through. Agreed, we do have 'computer rages' on occasions, and sometimes even sheer despair. Yes, a few of my legal-eagle friends consider their PC as alien beings made with the sole aim of destroying their sanity. True, some of them mutter abuse at their monitors in language that would not be mentioned in polite society. Still, some of Fogg's findings left me speechless.

My mind boggled, for example, at the fact – proven by his team's experiments – that people would perceive a computer which was superficially similar to them (the colour of its frame matched that of the band they were wearing on their wrists) as 'more similar to them, smarter, more credible and *more likeable*' than an identical computer that was not similarly colour-labelled. Even more astonishing were the results of another experiment, carried out on Stanford students who had significant experience using computers, that showed the effect of 'computer praise' on humans. Students praised by the computer – in the form of dialogue boxes – apparently felt their self-esteem rise, were more willing to work with the computer again and *liked the computer more*.

Some of the examples provided in the book left me incredulous and made me question whether they reflected the author's attempt to make the book accessible to everyone, or the intellectual muscle (lack thereof) of his research students. And lest I be deemed biased by my classical education where persuasion was the sole domain of the lecturer, and other media were known as 'propaganda', I shall quote an example of 'persuasive mobile technology' that Fogg envisions for the future university students (*italics are mine*):

'Someday in the future, a first-year student named Pamela sits in a college library and removes an electronic device from her purse. It ... serves as Pamela's mobile phone, information portal, entertainment platform and personal organizer. She takes this device almost everywhere and *feels a bit lost without it*. Because she is serious about school, Pamela runs an application on her device called StudyBuddy. ... As Pamela begins her evening study session, she launches the StudyBuddy system.... StudyBuddy *congratulates her for studying for the third time that day*, meeting the goals she set at the beginning of the

academic quarter. The device suggests that [she] starts her study session with a five minute review of her biology vocabulary terms, then reads the two chapters assigned for tomorrow's sociology lecture. As Pamela reviews biology, the Study Buddy *shows a cluster of shapes which represent her class mates who are currently studying*. This *motivates her* to continue studying.

'Later that evening ... she is curious about her mentor, Jean, so she turns to StudyBuddy for information. Jean also subscribes to the Study Buddy system and has invited Pamela to her "awareness group". Pamela sees a symbol on the display that indicates that Jean is currently in one of the campus libraries Being a study mentor means that Jean has agreed to let Pamela *remotely view Jean's studying habits*. Using Study Buddy, Jean *can send simple sounds and tactile cues* such as vibration patterns to Pamela to encourage her to study.'

One wonders whether StudyBuddy will also make coffee and remind Pamela that she has to address her physiological functions. Such examples, of which the book abounds, make me worried. If in the future we will need computers to motivate us to learn (and stay healthy, recycle our garbage, stop smoking, drink enough water, etc.) does that imply that all those underprivileged, hungry, diseased residents of the Third World will have to deal with demotivation in addition to other issues. I cannot imagine what the simple sounds sent by the mentor would be, but can I assume that a similar device could be used to motivate anorexic teenagers to eat by making smacking noises? Personally, I would find any such interference distracting, not to mention that if I were suddenly touched by some disembodied presence in a quiet library, it would probably cause me to have a heart attack.

An even better example is related to how one should beneficially spend one's 'downtime' – that is, in queues, doctor's waiting rooms, on trains, etc. Fogg calls these periods 'mental white space', and suggests we should turn to mobile technology to *fill in the void*. He goes on to describe a mobile phone game his graduate students developed for just such void moments. It is called Tetrash – a bit like the famous Tetris, except that here the player sorts dropping trash into recycling bins, with the occasional garbage truck driving through one's screen to congratulate the player. Well, if we can feel better about ourselves if praised by a dialog box of a software application, then why not try a garbage truck for raising self-esteem?

My first thoughts when reading this example were: what on earth happened to reading books on trains and journals at the doctor's? And if we need to play – a legitimate way to whittle away boredom – then why not match book titles to writers, or inventions to scientists? Has our intellectual acumen also gone the trash way? As I personally know from trying to beat my peers at Tetris, such games can be mindlessly addictive, consuming much more than just 'downtime'. I have serious ethical issues with addiction to anything that in no way increases intellect or awareness.

The book deals with the 'how?' and 'what?' of captology, although it is a bit thin on the 'why?' and 'what if?' side of it. It devotes a whole chapter to the issue of credibility in the information environment and another to the ethical issues involved. So it should, given that many of the examples provided continually bring to mind all the 'wrong' ways of using computers to persuade those more gullible, naïve or vulnerable victims of information highway.

Credibility on the Web has long been an issue for information providers, librarians and teachers. To a greater or smaller extent, it is an issue for anyone trying to obtain the correct and current information online, attempting to purchase items or services, invest or pursue an education. Fogg explains the factors that make us discern whether a Web site is credible –

although I personally found that quite a few of his findings are contrary to my expectations. According to Fogg's research, this time with both American and Finnish subjects, the factor that makes a Web site most credible is quick responsiveness by e-mail to client enquiries, e-mailed confirmation of transactions and listing author's credentials. The worst sins against Web site credibility are ads, pop-ups and outdated information. Personalization and the personal touch seem to be very important (as they are in real-life encounters) in building trust. If there is anything in the book that I strongly recommend reading, it is the chapters on credibility and ethics.

Generally speaking, the book should be read by anyone interested in designing and maintaining information interfaces. The field of research is worth pursuing, if only because Fogg's findings are limited to USA population, and from my own experience such issues as credibility, persuasion, trust and ethics are culturally based. More research needs to be undertaken by scientists in developing countries where ICT with all its novelty, coupled with low levels of education, may have a much stronger impact on minds than they would in more developed parts of the world.

Reference

Fogg, J.B. 2003. *Persuasive technology: using computers to change what we think and do*. Amsterdam: Morgan Kaufman.

The book can be purchased from [Amazon](#).

Interesting links:

1. The [Captology Lab](#) at Stanford University provides definitions of key concepts as well as practical examples – as one reviewer of the book noted – mostly based on USA populace. It has an invitation to participate in research, and a newsletter for those interested in following Fogg's work. For those who are into blogging, there is the [Captology Notebook](#).
2. [Persuasive Technology](#) is Fogg's own Web site for the book. Nothing much there apart from the chance to obtain resources for those interested in teaching captology.
3. For information designers and providers interested in raising the credibility of their Web sites, the Fogg team has created the [Stanford Web Credibility Research](#) site. It has research papers, guidelines and publications.

About the author

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