

My Father Says He's a 'Targeted Individual.' Maybe We All Are

I was 11 when my father destroyed the condominium where he was living. Searching for hidden transistors or other devices that might be beaming voices into his skull, he took a hammer to the walls, shoved his fists into the holes, and pulled off chunks of plaster. He shut off the power generator and cut the electrical wires in the walls. He put his ear to the floor. He ripped up the carpet. He called 9-1-1.

A Mexican immigrant who perfected his English by reading books he sneaked into the San Diego shipyard where he helped build oil tankers, Marco Guerrero had always been an uncanny mechanic. He could see through to the machinery of everything as if he had x-ray vision: He could adjust brakes, fix broken pipes, tap telephone lines.

After mass layoffs at the shipyard, he stayed at home, documenting my first words on his camcorder and taking me to coastal tide pools to catch *cobitos*. But then he fell into a depression. My parents separated. He started smoking crack cocaine. After tearing his place apart, he vanished on a years-long, cross-border quest to escape alleged CIA persecutors.



The author's father tosses her at an artificial beach in the suburbs of San Diego, 1989.

Courtesy of Jean Guerrero

My mother took me and my sister to assess the damage to the condominium, which she owned but had let our father stay in after they separated. The

carpet lay in heaps against the punctured walls. A layer of cigarette ash coated the rooms. It looked apocalyptic. Our mother, a physician specializing in internal medicine, offered a psychiatric diagnosis. Your father, she said, has paranoid schizophrenia.

In college, I minored in neuroscience while majoring in journalism, searching for my absent father in fMRI brain scans and the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Though he had returned from his transcontinental odyssey a couple of years earlier and moved in with his mother in San Diego, I rarely saw him; when I visited, we exchanged few words.

But on my 20th birthday, I made a trip to my paternal grandmother's house, and my father, sober now for several years, dragged a chair next to me and started talking. It was the first lengthy conversation we'd had since I was a child.

The story he told sounded unlikely: that he was one of thousands of "targeted individuals," who had been covertly spied on and manipulated by the CIA in the early 2000s. (So-called TIs have begun [banding together](#) around the country and across the internet.) But he didn't sound agitated or disturbed the way I had imagined a paranoid schizophrenic might. He was articulate. He cited patents, research, and the central role of something he called [MKUltra](#), a real CIA mind-control program that ran from 1953 to 1973 that targeted drug addicts, prisoners, and other vulnerable people.

I didn't know anything about the pile of facts he'd just left at my feet—his far-fetched answer to the mystery of his breakdown and disappearance—but I felt it was my duty, as a journalist and as his daughter, to investigate the possibility that what he said was true. I hoped I could do it without falling down a rabbit hole.

One day, after scouring the internet for information about “MKUltra” and “CIA torture,” I was served with an ad for Trintellix, a pharmaceutical drug for depression. The ad was prominent on the page and encouraged me in large blue letters to “Take the first step.” For a moment, I wondered: Did I have depression? The idea of a conspiracy targeting my father was making me *feel* depressed.

Then a more likely hypothesis occurred to me. My online activity—using search terms like “V2K” and “government harassment”—had probably caused computer algorithms to place me in a category of people with paranoia, which is often accompanied by depression, leading advertisers to target me.

The hypothesis started to broaden: In our digital economy, covert players are constantly harvesting our data and churning out exquisitely tuned consumer profiles to tap into our dreams and desires. We *are* being surveilled. We are being controlled and manipulated. We are perhaps being tortured. But it's not the CIA or aliens perpetrating all this. We are doing it to ourselves.

A thought occurred to me: Could the stories of “targeted individuals” be a warning, a cautionary tale about the real targeting we experience as digital technologies pervade our lives? Perhaps my father’s perception of electronic harassment is the result of his sensitivity to the mechanics of things. He may be seeing through to the nuts and bolts of the web, weaving a story out of its danger and turning it into a terrifying delusion of persecution, suffering, and torment.

Stay with me here; the idea that madness might contain insights about overlooked realities is not new. There is a growing international network of people with hallucinations, [Intervoice](#), whose members have embraced their waking visions and the voices in their heads.

They see them not as undesirable symptoms of mental illness, but as tools

that serve the same function as dreams. They explore hallucinations for metaphorical insights to help them process unresolved experiences. They argue that traditional mental health approaches, focused on eradicating symptoms, fail to promote a meaningful, empowering relationship between patients and their hallucinations. On its website, the network urges people with schizophrenia “to listen (to hallucinations) but not to necessarily follow, to engage.” (The approach is [gaining traction](#) in the scientific community.)

What if the TI voices exist for the same reason? Maybe my father, and the thousands of people who have bonded over their self-perceived status as targeted individuals, are a kind of indirect warning system experiencing a kind of collective dream—canaries in the digital coal mine. We dismiss them as out of touch with reality. Yet we have all become the objects of monitoring and manipulation eroding the core of what makes us human: our free will.

Perhaps the “targeted individuals” are foretelling the future—one in which we’ve lost control of our minds.

I remember the first time I told my father I wanted to write about him for what became [my memoir](#), *Crux*. Papi choked on his beer, pounded his fist against his chest and shook his head, eyes watering.

When he could breathe again, he said: “Absolutely not. Maybe if someday you become famous and respected, you can do it. Otherwise, nobody will think twice if —” he lowered his voice, “if the CIA kills you.”

I paused, trying to think of the best response. “Pa, if I write your story, you’ll be immortal,” I said.

He rolled his eyes and squeezed indignation into his forehead, saying he didn’t care about the perpetuity of his insignificant ego, but I could see the grin growing on his face against his will. My father was human, just like me,

dying to live among the gods.



The author's father, Marco Guerrero, photographed in San Diego, October 2018.

Samantha Cooper

Humans are story-making machines. We are the only animal capable of such rich conceptualization, taking the raw material of reality and turning it into something more. Our minds connect objective entities, enfolding them in categories within categories: a man and a woman can be a mother and a father, who may be a couple, who are parents, who may be property owners and Americans.

In *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Yuval Noah Harari observes that our species conquered the globe because of our ability to share stories about

things that don't objectively exist, such as "gods, nations, and corporations." Such fictions allowed us to organize around shared values, goals, and ideas. It was not exactly wisdom—*sapiens*—that gave us dominion, but creative storytelling. We are *Homo fabulator*. "The real difference between us and chimpanzees is the mythical glue that binds together large numbers of individuals, families and groups," Harari writes. "This glue has made us masters of creation."

Unlike the Neanderthals and other early humans who could work together in groups of at most 150 individuals, we learned to cooperate in groups of thousands, tens of thousands, millions—simply by telling stories to forge shared dreams. But now, this gift is in danger. As the speed and efficiency of computer processing increases at predictable rates, our ability to author our own destinies is being consumed by a conjured figment of our imagination: the internet.

We created the internet as a vast landscape where [information could be free](#). That was a delusion, of course, or at least a misapprehension. The advertising model that drives online media and commerce means we pay for the web's valuable resources by opening up our minds to what virtual reality pioneer Jaron Lanier calls "siren servers"—cloud computing networks that dominate the internet. Algorithms collect our data and crunch that into maps of our minds, which companies use to manipulate our decisions. Power concentrates where the data are. Lanier argues that we are surrendering our free will "bit by bit" to Amazon, Facebook, Google, and their clients.

In *Who Owns The Future*, he writes: "When you are wearing sensors on your body all the time, such as the GPS and camera on your smartphone and constantly piping data to a megacomputer owned by a corporation that is paid by 'advertisers' to subtly manipulate you ... you gradually become less free."

This surrender is triggering a breakdown in our ability to distinguish fact from fiction. Instead of moving through the world as autonomous actors with original thoughts and inquiries, we become objects of what is dictated to us via the digital realm, including fake news.

While advertising dates back to papyrus, it gained a broader reach after the Industrial Revolution; the Information Age opened its Pandora's box. Digital feedback loops allow advertisers to predict our fears and cravings and to influence our purchases and preoccupations. The information economy thrives on the currency of our data—our selves. It is unseating us as masters of our own destinies and distorting the fabric of reality as we know it.

Sound familiar? Many who hear the TI stories of surveillance and manipulation dismiss them as mere delusion. But we have created machines that track our every move, that beam thoughts into our heads. Were the targeted individuals America's prophets all along?

My father told me about the CIA agents who allegedly followed him at the turn of the millennium. The TIs collectively refer to this as “gang stalking,” the perception of groups tracking and harassing them. As my father traveled across continents, he says he was trailed by “gringos” in suits and black SUVs with American plates.

He describes an instance where the stalking became so unbearable that he drove to a Mexican jail and begged the officers to put him behind bars, where he thought he would be safe from the CIA. “I want you to arrest me!” he recalls saying. “All of them were trying to be real nice. ‘Why? Do you have drugs?’ I told them I had been doing drugs.”

A targeted individual in San Diego explained to me that her stalkers often coordinate to mock her and make her feel she's losing her mind. After she went through a difficult breakup, she noticed persecutors posing as couples,

kissing and hugging in front of her to torment her. “You know when someone kisses and it’s natural,” she says, speaking on condition of anonymity because she feared for her life. “This wasn’t natural.”

An early sign of schizophrenia is apophenia, the tendency to perceive connections among unrelated external phenomena. It's the product of our innate storytelling impulse, unmoored from healthy inhibitions. Ironically, the brains of people with schizophrenia are afflicted by disconnectivity—the loss of connections between cortical structures. But while some TIs have schizophrenia diagnoses, their perceptions aren't necessarily meaningless. They can shine a light on a problem we have yet to fully process.

More than 50 years ago, Carl Jung argued that the dreaming phase of sleep—now known as REM, for the rapid eye movement that characterizes it—serves our mental health by maintaining an equilibrium between the conscious and unconscious parts of our minds. “For the sake of mental stability ... the unconscious and the conscious must be integrally connected and thus move on parallel lines,” he writes in *Man And His Symbols*. “If they are split apart or ‘dissociated,’ psychological disturbance follows.”

Scientific evidence supports Jung’s idea that dreams give our minds a cohesiveness that can be fractured; REM sleep deprivation has been correlated with mental disorders.

Perhaps the TIs’ stories signal a dissociated society. Just as our brains must integrate the conscious and unconscious, our collective imagination must reconcile the drab perceived reality of clicking on Amazon links with the darker facts of a digital system that is taking control of our lives.

I suspect that TIs experience this control consciously, and rather literally to boot: Strangers are sending voices into their heads. Strangers are harassing them.

We can dismiss the targeted individual whose persecutors allegedly tormented her about a breakup. Or we can ask ourselves if her story reveals something we've ignored about ourselves: a social media dynamic in which we are actually being watched, in which our most intimate lives are exposed, in which we are sometimes mocked and taunted by remorseless strangers.

There's no mystery that Facebook knows our gender, ages, hometowns, birthdays, friends, likes, political leanings, and internet browsing habits. Facebook can tell, by analyzing our likes and comments, whether we are going through a breakup or a divorce. It can make predictions about our health. It can algorithmically intuit our fantasies and fears and use that information to target us with messaging so personalized it feels like persecution.

Consider this example from my own life: After the *Los Angeles Times* [published](#) allegations of sexual misconduct by a gynecologist at the university I attended, Facebook started bombarding me with pictures of his face in the form of ads, from plaintiff lawyers offering free consultations and injury checks. I'd had an uncomfortable experience with this gynecologist and had been considering sharing my story with journalists after reading the first article. But seeing his face on my news feed every time I opened Facebook felt invasive, almost nightmarish.

My USC classmates and I were being stalked by lawyers who knew we'd attended the university while the gynecologist worked there. It didn't feel like the platform was presenting an option to speak up; it felt like harassment. The specificity of the ads, their omnipresence and relation to a very personal incident in my life felt like an assault on my process of deliberation—on the integrity of my free will.

Like my father, I was experiencing a form of gang stalking. And it was real.

In the Bible, men who perceive voices and visions nobody else can see or hear are prophets. They are in communication with God. With the sea nowhere in sight, Noah built a ship and herded animals onto it, saving life on Earth from God's wrathful flood. Moses foresaw plagues of flies, boils, locusts, and the deaths of firstborn sons, convincing the Pharaoh to free the Israelites.

In the '70s, the American psychologist Julian Jaynes argued that all early humans suffered from hallucinations because their two brain hemispheres, connected by nerve fibers of the corpus callosum, were not fully integrated. The voices of one hemisphere were perceived by the other as external to the self—thoughts were the voices of gods.

“We could say that before the second millennium BC, *everyone* was schizophrenic,” Jaynes writes in *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. As the brain hemispheres became integrated, humans began to perceive the gods' voices as their own internal dialogue. They acquired free will.

The HBO series *Westworld* depicts a world in which robots gain agency through a similar process. In one scene, a creator speaks to his digital creation and tries to coax her into consciousness: “I gave you a voice, my voice, to guide you along the way. But you never got there ... Consciousness isn't a journey upward, but a journey inward. Not a pyramid, but a maze. Every choice could bring you closer to the center or send you spiraling to the edges, to madness. Do you understand now, Dolores, what the center represents? Whose voice I've been wanting you to hear?”

Watching this series, I saw in Dolores' journey to consciousness the opposite of our present path as we surrender our minds to computer algorithms. What if our own freedom depends on our realizing that the voices of “targeted individuals” are our own collective unconscious?

My father fought the alleged mind-control experiments as if his humanity were at stake, collecting evidence, researching remedies, traveling far from home. Perhaps we can learn something from his resistance.

The prophet Abraham, according to the biblical tale, hears the voice of God telling him to sacrifice his only son. Without a second thought, Abraham takes his boy to Moriah and ties him to an altar. He pulls a knife from his pocket and God calls out to him from heaven, stopping him just in time, praising him for his obedience: “I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore.”

This is the promise made by the digital realm: that if we surrender our minds to it, if we prize it above the people we love, we will be rewarded with a kind of immortality. In Silicon Valley, it is considered a certain future: We will soon be able to upload our minds to the internet and live forever in digital Edens. But the idea fails to consider that such an eternity would come at the cost of our free will. Would we still be human then?

My journey into my father's world led to strange and unexpected places, including the ruins of a Mexican ranch where his great-grandmother, a *curandera*, was said to have communed with spirits. The townspeople relied on her for plant remedies and prophetic wisdom. People traveled from far away to see *La Adivina*, the Diviner.

The author's paternal great-great-grandmother was a healer in the Mexican state of Zacatecas. She was known as *La Adivina*—the Diviner.

Courtesy of Jean Guerrero

I contemplate the parallels between *La Adivina* and my father and the differences in the stories our societies weaved: One heard the voices of the dead and was thought to have a gift, while another suffered hallucinations

and was considered ill. To what extent had those stories influenced their outcomes?

In the backyard of a house in northern Mexico, where my father moved after living with his mother in San Diego, Papi built a garden of medicinal crops like comfrey and *ashitaba*. His cupboards were filled with powders and potions. He claimed the CIA rarely sent voices into his head anymore, but had started sending a mysterious illness into his body to keep him exhausted and subservient. He was trying to cure himself; traditional doctors were failing to detect his illness. He tried different seeds and tinctures on himself and my grandmother's Chihuahua. *Abuelita* claims he cured the dog of blindness. My father says he cured himself of his illness.

I visited my father and asked him about the voices he used to hear. He described them: male and female CIA agents, commenting on his actions, insulting him, taunting him. I asked how he knew he wasn't hallucinating, given that crack can induce psychosis. The reason was obvious to him: The CIA never bothered him on airplanes because the aircraft's aluminum alloys protected him from electromagnetic weapons. The voices stopped if he wrapped himself up in aluminum foil.

I looked into the real-world CIA mind control experiments my father had mentioned: MKUltra. The program involved slipping LSD to more than 10,000 unwitting civilians, among other things, to see if they could manipulate people's behavior. It was exposed by a [New York Times article](#) in 1974.

After MKUltra was investigated by the Senate's Church committee and the Rockefeller commission, then-President Gerald Ford signed an executive order in 1976, prohibiting "experimentation with drugs on human subjects" without their consent. But the order was revised by subsequent

administrations, and the CIA's [internal guidelines](#) later gave the agency director the discretion to “approve, modify, or disapprove all proposals pertaining to human subject research.”

In his book *Who Owns The Future*, Jaron Lanier writes: “When you are wearing sensors on your body all the time, such as the GPS and camera on your smartphone and constantly piping data to a megacomputer owned by a corporation that is paid by ‘advertisers’ to subtly manipulate you ... you gradually become less free.”

Dogboy

TIs believe MKUltra was replaced with a more sophisticated CIA program using electromagnetic or radio wave technologies. My father said the CIA chose to experiment on him because as a crack addict, because nobody would believe him if he spoke up. Also, he thinks the agents sought to eradicate his addiction. Success would demonstrate the electromagnetic weapons’ behavior-altering effectiveness—and it worked. He did stop smoking crack.

Unconvinced, I filed Freedom of Information Act requests for any records about my father to the CIA, the FBI, and more, including a signed certification of identity from my father with authorization to release the information to me. While most agencies said they had no such records, the CIA said it could neither confirm nor deny their existence, citing a national security exemption. I appealed. Same response. For people prone to conspiracy theories, this may serve as proof that the CIA does have records on my father. For me, it confirms only the CIA’s penchant for secrecy.

When I analyze the voices my father described rather than disregard them, I am struck by the parallels with the hyper-personalized messaging we all experience: The CIA agents’ alleged surveillance parallels the web’s tracking of our activity. Their commands echo invasive ads. How often have hidden players on the web influenced our behavior by shouting or whispering in our ears? Russian interference in the 2016 election is yet another example of the far-reaching power of AI-based messaging, affecting not only our consumer

choices but also the integrity of our democracy.

Earlier this year, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg testified before Congress about the leak of millions of users' private data to Cambridge Analytica—a firm hired by Trump's 2016 campaign to influence voters. Zuckerberg admitted that Facebook had become a vehicle for “fake news, foreign interference in elections, and hate speech.”

In a recent *New York Times* [column](#), the Turkish technosociologist (and [WIRED contributor](#)) Zeynep Tufekci criticized YouTube as an engine of extremism due to its “recommender algorithm,” which keeps viewers on the site by directing users to increasingly incendiary content. She explained that after she viewed Trump rally videos for research purposes, YouTube autoplayed “white supremacist rants, Holocaust denials, and other disturbing content.”

The ad-based digital economy notoriously promotes echo chambers, which boost prejudices and paranoias. Some have attributed the rise of TI theories to the fact that anyone who feels a strange buzzing in their body and Google's “electronic harassment” can end up in contact with other targeted individuals, and as a result of conversations with them, come to the conclusion that they themselves are targeted. Misapprehension spreads like a virus.

What we fail to recognize when we dismiss targeted individuals is that the web is having the same impact on us. The plague of alternative facts spreads through the arteries of social media like a drug. A study [published in Science](#) this year found that fake news spreads “farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information.”

Our susceptibility to fake news is related to [confirmation bias](#) and the [illusion of explanatory depth](#), the belief that we understand things better than we do.

What we need, what a healthy society needs, is the habit of inquisitiveness that comes from a humble recognition of ignorance. The more we admit we *don't* know, the more likely we are to seek out information that increases our knowledge.

Curiosity is driven by a kind of hunger. When we are alone with our own thoughts, when we spend time with questions, we come upon original ideas. The ubiquitous stimulation of modern society leaves us with a false sense of satiety and no space for uncertainty.

Our storytelling capacity emerges from the wellspring of silence. Perhaps the targeted individuals are pointing to the noise we have stopped hearing. One way to destroy an echo chamber is to search for the voices in the walls—the way my father did.

During the Renaissance, people who hallucinated—“madmen”—were believed to have a cryptic wisdom, more like poets than prophets. In the age of reason, they were cast aside as aberrant and institutionalized en masse. The 20th-century Christian philosopher G.K. Chesterton argued for a more moderate approach. In his book *Orthodoxy*, he wrote that madness dwells not in irrational minds but in rational ones that overestimate what they can grasp: “It is the logician who seeks to get the heavens into his head. And it is his head that splits.”

America, with its fetishization of logic and data, has one of the world's [highest rates](#) of mental illness, according to the World Health Organization.

Chesterton wrote that sanity lies in accepting the limits of our minds. We can't distill the whole world into numbers and equations. While some knowledge comes from separating reality into pieces we can comprehend, some comes from connecting things, allowing them to gain added meaning and mystery. Sometimes the truth lies in a metaphor or a rhyme.

What exactly can we learn from the stories of TIs? First, there is symbolism in the villain some selected: the Central Intelligence Agency. Their fixation on the CIA may highlight the pernicious effect of covert data collection. The name of the agency is the clue.

In his second book *Homo Deus*, Harari argues that *Homo sapiens* will soon see the emergence of a new species as a result of centralized intelligence gathering: god-man. Revolutions in computer science and biology, and specifically neuroscience, will allow us to master and replicate the *sapiens* code. But it's not that we're all going to have access to immortality. A tiny elite could end up controlling our bodies and minds.

Harari argues that dictatorships and democracies can be seen as two different forms of data processing: centralized and distributive. In the world wars of the 20th century, democracy emerged victorious because distributive data processing was the most efficient tool for mobilization. The digital economy is changing the game, giving the upper hand to centralized data processing. Harari believes that our clicks and likes are paving a path toward dictatorship.

If we wish to reverse course, we must decentralize the digital economy and regulate the ownership of data, taking it out of the hands of a few tech companies that now control it. It will be difficult. Unlike property, data is intangible and hard to delineate. But our species is made to accomplish miracles of reorganization. All it takes is a new story. Perhaps this is a starting point: The targeted individuals are living the nightmare of what could happen. We must awaken.

As a child in northern Mexico, my father often had a hard time sleeping. He lay hiding under the blankets, heartbeat like a freight train on old tracks as his stepfather roared at his mother. Screams. Smashing plates. A body

thumping against the floor. In the morning: his mother's bruises. A bulging black eye.

Papi taught himself how to fix broken televisions and discarded radios. He had an intuitive understanding of simple machines. If only he could figure out the machinery behind human behavior, he could fix people.

Marco Guerrero while on vacation in the Mexican state of Michoacán, in 1987.

Courtesy of Jean Guerrero

He built a wire-mesh cage in the backyard and began collecting animals in glass jars. He dissected lizards, frogs, tarantulas. He sought to determine how hearts pump blood, how brains form thoughts. He tried to keep the creatures alive. But often his subjects died.

My father was tormented by nightmares. He suspected there was something evil in him, his curiosity too extreme.

Recounting his experiments, my father's eyes shift around the room as if looking for an escape. "I wouldn't have done that if I had other *means*," he says, breathless. He searches my face, as if for fear or disgust, but that isn't what I felt.

In a *Scientific American Mind* [article](#), Intervoice board member Eleanor Longden recalled that the voices in her head stopped sounding sinister once she realized that each was related to parts of herself that "carried overwhelming emotions that I had never had an opportunity to process and resolve—memories of sexual trauma and abuse, of shame, anger, loss, and low self-worth." All she had to do to soften their grip was listen.

As a writer with an eye for metaphors and an ear for rhymes, I can't help seeing in my father's shame about his boyhood experiments a clear identification with the creatures he tortured—perhaps a literal identification.

But Jung argued that the dreamer is the primary authority on the secret meaning of a dream. My father has the final say on what his voices and visions signify.

The psychologist Gail Hornstein argued in *Agnes's Jacket: A Psychologist's Search For The Meanings Of Madness*: “Madness is more code than chemistry. If we want to understand it, we need translators—native speakers, not just brain scans.”

By the same token, if individual dreams and hallucinations are meant for each person who has them, collective hallucinations are meant for the societies where they occur.

My father believes the CIA subjected him to remotely induced electric shocks, filling him with lightning-bolt pain when he tried to smoke crack. He explained that a copper penny he placed on his forehead during one of the attacks flew off him as if zapped by a corporeal current. Whenever he touched a metal railing, the pain dissipated.

Technology capable of inducing something like the TIs' “electric shocks” does exist: The Active Denial System is a military weapon using millimeter wave radio frequency to zap people. California resident Donald Friedman [repeatedly sued](#) the government for allegedly harassing him with such weapons. One of his Freedom of Information Act requests resulted in the declassification of a [1998 US Army document](#) that discusses a microwave technology capable of beaming sounds into heads from hundreds of meters away. With some refinement, the document states, the technology could induce “[voices within one's head.](#)”

My father recently described the frustration of trying to convince a psychologist he wasn't crazy: “There was a TV playing over there in the room, and I said ‘Do you hear that TV? Well, I hear it too. But that doesn't mean I'm

'hearing voices.' There's a technology in which they can make you remotely hear voices, and it has been *documented*. You can *read* about it."

The fact that you can read about these technologies does not prove his theories. But when I sit with my uncertainty, rather than dismiss my father's beliefs outright, my eyes open to the covert manipulation that is commonplace in our lives. We carry it around in our pockets. We wear it on our wrists. We devote more than [10.5 hours a day](#) to screen time.

Facebook has conducted experiments on us that show [how susceptible we are to mind control](#). In 2012, the company secretly tampered with the news feeds of nearly 700,000 people, manipulating the ratio of emotionally positive to emotionally negative posts, then monitoring the subsequent activity of those users.

What they found is that emotions can be remotely controlled and are highly contagious on the platform. People who saw more unhappy posts showed more unhappy activity and vice versa. Many questioned the experiment's legality and ethics, wondering if Facebook had [triggered any suicides](#). Facebook apologized for the way the experiments were conducted and promised to [conduct them "differently"](#) in the future, with enhanced review.

We ignore the parallels between those experiments and the ones the TIs describe at our own peril. We are amphibians in a pot of water over a flame.

MKUltra is now seeing a resurgence in the popular culture through Netflix shows like *Wormwood*, a docudrama based on Eric Olson's [real-life quest](#) to uncover the facts about his father's death during MKUltra. The name of the series is an allusion to a line in the Bible in which the star Wormwood falls from the sky and turns waters of the Earth bitter. Olson describes finding no relief because nobody has been held accountable.

Given this lack of closure for families like his, is it really that crazy for thousands of people to believe the US is still illegally experimenting on people—especially after [Edward Snowden's leaks](#) showing NSA surveillance of the general population? Don't their beliefs reveal something meaningful about our failure to acknowledge the extent of our wrongs and the reach of our technologies?

We have become commodities manipulated by shadowy forces beyond our control: corporations, computer algorithms, campaigns. We are caught in a web where we can be easily drained of blood.

How can we correct this? Legislative restrictions on the collection of personal data are the logical first step. Supporting subscription- or donation-based news organizations could help counter the viral nature of alternative facts.

Lanier, the computer scientist, argues that we should demand payments for data that companies collect from us. He envisions a world in which we are compensated for every profitable datum we provide, with payments proportionate to the profit they produce. He argues that such a world—in which we value the humans behind data as much as the data themselves—would lead to a new era of economic prosperity, equality, and freedom.

The Electronic Frontier Foundation is fighting against mass surveillance with lawsuits and browser add-ons that block advertisers from tracking online activity. EFF's international director Danny O'Brien works with people who are actually targeted by repressive regimes for their journalism or activism. He says he sometimes get calls from people with mental illness who wrongly believe they're being targeted. Many have an inquiring spirit that he finds instructive. "These people aren't just sitting back and accepting what's happening to them," he adds. "They're trying to understand."

But O'Brien hypothesizes that for too many self-described TIs, affirming

rather than escaping their victimization is the goal. They show a preference for false solutions, such as aluminum foil hats, because their belief that they're being targeted serves to distract them from real traumas they don't want to face. "Paranoia is strange because it's simultaneously comforting and disturbing," he says. "It's disturbing to think people are spying on you, but it's also comforting to have an explanation for why your world sucks."

Fears of surveillance and manipulation in the world should motivate people to change it, according to O'Brien. Self-agency lies not in the TIs' delusions of persecution nor in most people's delusions of safety, but in recognizing that the two mirror each other. In both cases, a human story has gained authorship of human minds.

In 2014 my father became sick again. The tomatoes in his backyard blackened and shriveled. A coastal wind threw salt on his sagging garden, which began to stink. Papi drank bottle after bottle of whiskey. His skin became the color of *maíz amarillo*.

He begged me to bury him without ceremony.

"Just push me over like a dump. Like a stone. Cuz that's all I am," he says.

"That's not true. You're a human being. And a father. And a son," I say.

I begged him, through tears, to stop drinking. He had been cycling in and out of depression and substance abuse all my life. I remembered a beautiful garden he built when I was a little girl: a Mexican Garden of Eden. Wooden enclosures for *fresas* and *frijoles*. A towering wire-mesh trellis for tomatoes. Rows of cacti and other desert plants. Cages for roosters, hens, ducks, cockatiels, iguanas, hamsters, guinea pigs, and rabbits.

When he became depressed for the first time, his fruit shriveled into wrinkled

black sacs. Flowers drooped on their stalks. The cacti rotted and turned a sickly brown. Our animals began to die as if in synchrony with Papi's slumber. We buried pet after pet.

My mother bought a blue-green iMac G3 in 1999. I began to write every day. As I typed every detail of my banal existence into the computer, I felt I was immortalizing myself, protecting a part of my mind from the nothingness that devoured so many things I loved. It eased my existential anxieties. Years later, when I learned of the possibility of uploading human consciousness into digital Edens, I was enthralled.

I didn't realize that what I needed was not eternity but freedom from the story of immortality. We were never meant to be gods. Or at least not gods in the way we envisioned them: all-knowing and all-powerful. If we continue to delude ourselves into believing that our destiny lies in knowledge and power, we will become slaves of the gods that we create.

The author and her father photographed in San Diego, October 2018.

Samantha Cooper

We have lost an appreciation for the limits our flesh and blood—the price of human life. We are not omniscient and never can be. Sometimes, groups with divergent beliefs detect what we refuse to see. Targeted individuals like my father remind us of what we really are: not *Homo sapiens*, but *Homo fabulator*. Our fate is shaped by the stories we tell. Now they are growing so strong they may supplant us.

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