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978-1-107-12874-3 - Psychology of the Digital Age: Humans Become Electric

John R. Suler

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PSYCHOLOGY OF THE DIGITAL AGE

Based on two decades of participant-observation field research in diverse online environments, this engaging book offers insights for improving lifestyles and enhancing well-being in the digital age. John R. Suler, a founder of the field of cyberpsychology, explains its fundamental principles across a wide variety of topics, including online identity management, disinhibition, communication via text and photographs, intimacy and misunderstandings in online relationships, conflicting attitudes toward social media, addiction, deviant behavior, virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and media overload. He provides a new framework, the “eight dimensions of cyberpsychology architecture,” which researchers, students, and general readers interested in cyberpsychology can apply as a valuable tool for creating and understanding different digital realms. *Psychology of the Digital Age* focuses on the individual, shedding new light on our conscious as well as subconscious reactions to online experiences and our intrinsic human need to self-actualize.

John R. Suler is Professor of Psychology at Rider University’s Science and Technology Center and Honorary Professor at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland. He has published widely on cyberpsychology, Eastern philosophy, photographic psychology, psychotherapy, and creativity, including the book *Contemporary Psychoanalysis and Eastern Thought*.

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FOREWORD

Professor John R. Suler is acknowledged as the world's leading expert in cyberpsychology and the founder of the discipline. As a cyberpsychologist, I am honored to be invited to introduce readers to this text.

Psychology of the Digital Age: Humans Become Electric presents an engaging overview of the field of cyberpsychology as a unique discipline, and will appeal to anyone who is immersed in or fascinated by the experience of online environments. The book you are about to enjoy is a wide-ranging exploration of the profound impact of technology on human beings, and the significance of cyberspace as a new environment humans have created for ourselves.

Cyberpsychology has been considered by some to be a subdiscipline within applied psychology; however, Professor Suler's treatment creates a powerful argument for the consideration of cyberpsychology as a unique and valuable discipline in its own right, and is groundbreaking in this regard. Suler draws on a vast range of theoretical constructs in psychology, including psychodynamic theory, operant theory, group dynamics theory, and theories of human motivation, which not only ground the cyberpsychological arguments in established science, but also showcase his vast knowledge of the psychology of human behavior mediated by technology.

Many current debates and trends concerning the impact of technology on human behavior are explored. I found the section that discusses the psychoanalytic typology of Nancy McWilliams particularly insightful. Professor Suler points out that this typology has explanatory value regarding the full spectrum of human personality, from normal to pathological. This premise is then wonderfully illuminated in an applied context, whereby personality is considered in online environments – for example, psychopathic personality types and the impact of online anonymity, or narcissistic personalities and the forums they select to display themselves.

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In an important chapter on the disinhibited self, Professor Suler explores the *online disinhibition effect*. This effect, one of the principal and best-known constructs in the discipline of cyberpsychology, was conceptualized and first proposed by the author over a decade ago. His publications on this phenomenon have been cited thousands of times. As an active researcher in this field, I am perhaps most excited about the new theoretical model that Professor Suler has created. The *eight dimensions of cyberpsychology architecture* provide a unique, comprehensive framework for exploring experiences in cyberspace and have applications in a wide range of fields (consumer psychology, digital marketing, user interface, interactive design, online community development). Suler also explores many important areas such as ethics in cyberspace and Big Data, issues that will only continue to grow in importance and relevance over time.

Suler has a unique style, a philosophical approach grounded in psychology and delivered as cyberpsychology. His transdisciplinary vision is reflective of the discipline itself, and therefore the content will likely resonate with those of us who are immersed in this subject and those who are interested in discovering it. John's elegant writing style, especially the narrative and historical aspects of the book, should delight anyone with an interest in technology and psychology while providing professors and students in all the fields that interface with the digital world a coherent and informed overview of cyberpsychology.

This is cyberpsychology by the ultimate expert, my good friend and colleague Professor John R. Suler. A most enjoyable and engaging read.

Professor Mary Aiken
Director, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland
CyberPsychology Research Center

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PREFACE

My relationship with computers began in the late 1970s as a graduate student in Ed Katkin's psychophysiology lab at the State University of New York (SUNY) Buffalo. Back then, they were called "microprocessors" that we used for real-time control of experimental procedures and data collection. My journey since those days feels like a long one, filled with the many ups and downs that all of us experience in our love/hate relationship with this digital age. I remember angrily smashing my desk chair into the ceiling when I accidentally deleted an almost completed manuscript on my IBM personal computer, learning the hard way the lesson to always back up. I remember my delight the very first time I saw a photograph on my Mac Quadra. In the 1980s, when my students undertook an assignment to analyze the pros and cons of Eliza, the early psychotherapy simulation program, I asked them one day how many of them used this thing called "email." No one raised a hand. Now they all come to class with phones that guarantee their constant connection to social media, while thinking that email is something their parents use.

This book is an account of my journey as a cyberpsychologist through the decades of this digital age – an account of my insights as a researcher, but also as a citizen of what I still like to call "cyberspace." By highlighting the basic cyberpsychological principles of our highs and lows in this new digital land, of our love/hate relationship with technology, I hope that this book can serve as a useful resource for anyone who seeks to maximize well-being and compassion in cyberspace, and for my fellow cyberpsychologists who wish to understand the concepts and methods that guided me in my work.

With the rise of the Internet, we have entered a new era in human evolution, and with it the need for a psychology of this digital age. But as the

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subtitle of this book suggests, our voyage into this new era revives many of the basic triumphs and strife depicted in the classic Eugene O'Neill play *Mourning Becomes Electra*, which is itself a retelling of the ancient stories of the *Oresteia* by Aeschylus – archetypal tales of love, aggression, loyalty, betrayal, revenge, and family relationships. Our new electric selves in the digital era transcend the old boundaries of human experience while echoing back to us all the emotional complexities inherent in the ancient depths of our human condition.

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