



The User Illusion: Cutting Consciousness Down to Size (Penguin Press Science)

By Tor Norretranders

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As **John Casti** wrote, "Finally, a book that really does explain consciousness." This groundbreaking work by Denmark's leading science writer draws on psychology, evolutionary biology, information theory, and other disciplines to argue its revolutionary point: that consciousness represents only an infinitesimal fraction of our ability to process information. Although we are unaware of it, our brains sift through and discard billions of pieces of data in order to allow us to understand the world around us. In fact, most of what we call thought is actually the unconscious discarding of information. What our consciousness rejects constitutes the most valuable part of ourselves, the "Me" that the "I" draws on for most of our actions--fluent speech, riding a bicycle, anything involving expertise. No wonder that, in this age of information, so many of us feel empty and dissatisfied. As engaging as it is insightful, this important book encourages us to rely more on what our instincts and our senses tell us so that we can better appreciate the richness of human life.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

The "user illusion" in computing is the desktop graphical user interface (GUI): the friendly, comprehensible illusion presented to the user to conceal all the bouncing bits and bytes that do the actual work. Tor Nørretranders writes that "our consciousness is a user illusion for ourselves and the world ... one's very own map of oneself and one's possibilities of intervening in the world." Much of Nørretranders' evidence comes from comparing the wide bandwidth of experience to the narrow bandwidth of consciousness, and from examining how much of our brain function is never consciously acknowledged. Although slightly out of date (the book was written in 1991; it was a bestseller in Europe), *The User Illusion* has been well translated and gives a refreshing, non-Anglophone take on a problem that is not likely to go away anytime soon.

From Library Journal

Norretranders declares: "Consciousness is a fraud." The realm of the subconsciousAthe "Me"Ais infinitely richer and must be cultivated if we are to experience the full sensation of reality. A best seller in the author's native Denmark, this book weaves together concepts from mathematics, computer science, neurology, and psychology.

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From [Booklist](#)

Norretranders, a top Danish science writer, makes his American debut with this sophisticated, cogent, original, and startling study of the nature of consciousness. A best-seller in Europe and a Book-of-the-Month Club selection in spite of its heady contents, this elaborate journey through the revelations of physics and chaos, complexity, and information theories elucidates the enormous changes wrought by our involvement with computers. It turns out that discarded information, or "exformation," is just as intrinsic to comprehension as selected information, and further, that conscious thought is "limited to a minute part of the abundance of information available as sensory input." In other words, the ratio between what our senses record and what we have conscious access to is on a par with the ratio between this concise review and the book it purports to summarize, that is, about one million to one. Our prized consciousness is a fine filter, designed, it would appear, to impose order, so, just as we suspected, we do "know" vastly more than we think. *Donna Seaman*

Users Review

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