

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

Episode 13: Mr. Harris Goes to Washington

- Aza Raskin: Hey, everyone. We're going to try something a little bit different for this episode of Your Undivided Attention. Tristan just went to Congress to testify.
- Jan Schakowsky: Mr. Harris, you are recognized now for five minutes.
- Aza Raskin: The hearing was on Americans At Risk: Manipulation and Deception in the Digital Age.
- Tristan Harris: Thank you, Chairwoman Schakowsky and members. I really appreciate you inviting me here.
- Aza Raskin: So why did we go to Congress?
- Tristan Harris: I'm going to go off-script. I come here because I'm incredibly concerned. We've often framed these issues as we've got a few bad apples. We've got these bad deep fakes; we've got to get them off the platform. We've got this bad content, we've got these bad bots, and we've got these dark patterns. What I want to argue is we have dark infrastructure.
- Tristan Harris: This is now the infrastructure by which 2.7 billion people, bigger than the size of Christianity, make sense of the world. And if someone went along, private companies and built nuclear power plants. All across the United States, and they started melting down, and they said, "Well, it's your responsibility to have hazmat suits and have a radiation kit," that's essentially what we're experiencing now. The responsibility is being put on consumers when, in fact, if it's the infrastructure, it should be put on the people building that infrastructure.
- Aza Raskin: We thought instead of us interviewing someone, I'm actually just going to interview Tristan about what that experience was like.
- Aza Raskin: I'm Aza Raskin.
- Tristan Harris: I'm Tristan Harris. This is Your Undivided Attention.
- Tristan Harris: There you are, and you're up there with three other witnesses. Monika Bickert from public policy at Facebook, and a professor of law and dark patterns, and Joan Donovan at Harvard Kennedy School.
- Tristan Harris: Think about how important this conversation is, and what's going wrong and how much is at stake. The format is five minutes opening statement, and then each Congress member has a question that they can ask for five minutes. Usually, it takes them two minutes or so to tee up their question, and then there's a response from one person or two people.
- Tristan Harris: It's just very short, and it's actually a perfect example of the problems of the attention economy. You have a presidential debate, and it's like, "How are we going to solve the Middle East? What's the U.S. policy you advocate for? You have 30 seconds. Go." It's just not the right format.

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- Speaker 4: I know I'm running out of time.
- Speaker 5: I'm out of time.
- Speaker 6: Thank you, Mr. Harris. I've run out of time. I wish I had more time.
- Tristan Harris: One thing I struggle with is just, how can we have the space for people to really understand these issues. This is why we started this podcast, because we wanted the space to immerse people into these ideas.
- Aza Raskin: From a humane perspective, how would we redesign the hearing?
- Tristan Harris: That's a great question. I think hearings are more about, they're not about legislating the answer, they're about understanding. They're about creating shared understanding. Now here's the background of the reality, right? The members of Congress in this hearing had actually a second hearing going on at the same time on healthcare. So actually people were going in and out of the room.
- Aza Raskin: Really?
- Tristan Harris: Yeah, this is actually something people don't know and there's sort of an optical illusion because from the television or from the live stream or something, you only see the witnesses and you see an individual questioner, right?
- Tristan Harris: What you miss, what the camera doesn't show you. It's like a magic trick. There's sort of a background is that half of the representatives are moving back and forth in and out of the space because they have to go to another hearing and in case it's their time to ask the question, they have to be there to ask the question and then they moved back into this hearing and then they ask their question and then they leave.
- Aza Raskin: Where's the context then? That means the thing you said, the really important thing.
- Tristan Harris: Isn't actually heard.
- Aza Raskin: Isn't heard, yeah.
- Tristan Harris: Isn't heard by most of the people or if you have people who've pre-prepared questions that no matter what the person behind them just said, that might've even invalidated the frame of the question they're about to ask. They're still going to ask that question.
- Tristan Harris: And the way the media records that question actually hides the fact that there might have been a total disconnect between the assumptions that questioner B asks right after questioner A. We need processes that actually create shared understanding. And a lot of that actually had to happen behind closed doors, not

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closed doors like private tours, but in the sense of actually one-on-one meetings and that is much more effective.

Aza Raskin: Yeah. Well you, you came back hopeful.

Tristan Harris: Yeah, I did come back hopeful because it's not like everyone in the U S government has been listening to Your Undivided Attention and following all of these harms from addiction, shortening attention span, social isolation, reduced critical thinking, election engineering, etcetera. They haven't been following all of that. So what has me optimistic is that when people understand that these harms are not cultural trends that are happening in society by accident, they're happening by design of the business model.

Tristan Harris: And if enough people know there's a problem and the whole world knows that the government knows that there's a problem, then it's a matter of sort of shame and embarrassment for there to be no action. Obviously we live in a very partisan climate right now, but I think that, strangely I think there's a lot of people, a lot of allies in Capitol Hill who really want to do something.

Aza Raskin: So talk to me a little bit about the Overton window. What is it like, one, to just sit in front of senators and explain such a fundamental issue and then two what's changed between sort of the last time and this time? What's now in the Overton window? What can we say now that we couldn't say before?

Tristan Harris: We had several really incredible meetings with different members of Congress, senators, different agencies who have a large appetite.

Tristan Harris: And one thing I was excited to see was the conversation moving from privacy, which is important but not sufficient. And we wrote this op ed in the New York times recently where we challenged people. Step into your privacy utopia. You've perfectly protected people's data. You still see mass shortening of attention spans, loss and critical thinking, loss of romantic intimacy, social isolation, mental health, election engineering, disinformation, outrage, suffocation, narcissism, because all of those effects are still part of this other business model. So here's the thing that's exciting though. It used to be the case that people thought privacy would address all of these problems, but I think there's a real awareness now that we have to do something about these broader issues. And I think one of the biggest aspects of why it's been hard to do that is it can feel overwhelming.

Aza Raskin: Yeah.

Tristan Harris: It's a long list of harms now and it feels like they're coming from all sides.

Tristan Harris: But actually there's one generator function, which is this race to automate human attention. Many people when you meet them behind closed doors are really eager to solve these problems and really eager to look at things like Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act and Unfair and Deceptive Practices in sort of the federal trade commission rulemaking frameworks.

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- Aza Raskin: Did you see that there was bipartisan support for this issue or did you see that it broke along party lines? What did you see?
- Tristan Harris: Well, whenever the issue turns into free speech, it's just an endless rabbit hole. It's not going to go anywhere, right? For example, let's take this hearing. So the hearing was about Americans at risk, online deception, and deep fakes. Let's take deep fix. Well, who's to say that, that deep fake over there that's faking an image of your favorite politician saying something funny.
- Tristan Harris: Just funny. Satires irony. That's just a free speech rabbit hole. The real question is how fast does it travel? Is it labeled as a deep fake? Is there a clear disclosure? Right. The key thing is context. There's interesting content and context. Free speech is a content conversation. Free reach is a context conversation. How fast do things spread.
- Aza Raskin: Describe that a little bit more. Why is that context?
- Tristan Harris: Let me give you an example that people probably get from their own experience of Facebook. Content might be something like, I posted this article that was true, but it might be false context because it was actually an article from five years ago and we've since debunked that article. So it's not that it's fake news, it's just that it's old and when it was posted in the newsfeed, it's presented as if it's brand new.
- Tristan Harris: And so that's a context problem, not a content problem. And context is the medium of our understanding. You know, it's our friend Brewster Kale at internet archive, says that, there's this phrase that's common in the free speech community, that the solution to bad speech is more speech.
- Aza Raskin: But we know that doesn't work.
- Tristan Harris: We know that doesn't work. Because if your dependency is that you need more speech to battle bad speech, well then I'm just going to flood the channel with bad speech, disinformation noise until you're apathetic and won't do anything.
- Aza Raskin: That's right.
- Tristan Harris: And so Brewster has this great phrase that the solution to bad speech is better context, which is to say to contextualize and understand that you know, if that's a conspiracy theory, let's actually show that a lot of people think that, that's in doubt and that's a conspiracy. We can make some distinctions there like labeling.
- Tristan Harris: Do people know that something that is a deep fake is a deep fake is a good example.
- Aza Raskin: Yeah. Yeah, and then I like this idea of amplification liability. That is if you are going to amplify it, then the scale of the amplification should be timed to the scale of your liability. I think last time we were talking about the idea of an

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attention jail that Facebook could implement right now. There was a phrase you use that really, really struck me. We've often talked about how technology and the business models in particular are eroding the fabric of society and the phrase you use is that it's not so much that it's eroding the fabric of society is that it's become the fabric of society.

Tristan Harris: Yeah. This is really critical. I mean, the point we were making is that technology has become the infrastructure for every aspect of our social world.

Tristan Harris: It's sort of like if you got a prosthetic limb, it is your limb, you're holding this object. It is the now genuine extension of how you wake up in the morning, how you go to bed at night, how you open your mouth to say something to someone. So, okay, that's not necessarily bad. You can have technology takeover infrastructure. The problem is if there's a commercializing interest on intimate infrastructure, that's become the way that you communicate. So now the very meaning of communication has a commercial interest. There's no way basically for you to send a message from person A to person B without being paid for by person C who has an interest about what they want that context to be, that rhymed.

Aza Raskin: Therefore, it's true.

Tristan Harris: Therefore, it's true. There's a great psychology study about that, right?

Aza Raskin: If it rhymes, people viewed as more true if it's alliterative people viewed as more true.

Tristan Harris: Yeah. Let's see what were we just talking about.

Aza Raskin: We were talking about social fabric and I think we're about to move into social organs.

Tristan Harris: Yeah. So they have become the social organs of our society. You know, YouTube has become the broadcast organ for video, right? You don't really get to go somewhere else. It's the infrastructure for all, video, et cetera. The main point I made in a hearing is that, okay, so take this world down here, this world of atoms and, you've got a police force in case something goes wrong on the streets. We've got an FTC in case there's fraud happening unlawfully. And what from a business, we've got a Pentagon in case Russia tries to fly a plane into the country. Okay. So that's the physical space. But once I go up into the virtual space, now Russia can fly an information plane in.

Tristan Harris: Now where's the Pentagon? Instead of the Pentagon and thousands of military employees, et cetera. We've got 50 people on a trust and safety team who've been rolling over with employee turnover because it's been a tough time the last couple of years. And that's the best thing we've got. So the point is that when we move from the physical infrastructure to the virtual to the cyber internet world, we lose all the protections.

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Tristan Harris: During the hearing I said, "We used to have Saturday morning cartoons. We protected children from certain kinds of advertising, time, place, manner restrictions. When YouTube gobbles up that part of the attention economy, we lose all those protections. So why not bring back the protections of Saturday morning?" That's by the way, the same thing as context. It's time, manner and place restrictions on what times you can advertise to children or you can't do adult television during the primetime hours, things like that.

Tristan Harris: We lost all the protections. They're all gone. And that's happening with everything, whether it's how we treat teenagers, childhood development, child education, election advertising. We used to have fair, equal priced elections, so it should cost the same for candidate A to run an ad on TV at 7:00 PM as candidate B. "When Facebook gobbles up election advertising, we just removed all of those same protections. So we're basically moving from a lawful society to an unlawful virtual internet society. And that's what we have to change."

Aza Raskin: Marc Andreessen has the very famous quote, which is, "software is eating the world", which means that software is eating our protections.

Tristan Harris: Yeah. So this is example of a polarization study that Upturn just released. Upturn is this great nonprofit organization, and what they were studying was how far does your dollar go to generate clicks on advertising and is it fair across the aisle?

Tristan Harris: So what they did was they said, okay, here's a bunch of money and let's say we have a left leaning message and we try to advertise that to a left-leaning audience. Well, it's cheaper to put a left-leaning message and have it be reaching a left-leaning audience than it is for a left-leaning message to reach a right leaning audience. Same thing is true on the right obviously. It's cheaper for a right-leaning message to reach a right-leaning audience. So in other words, polarization is part of the business model. It's a polarization for profit business model because it costs more to reach across the aisle than it does to have that \$I reach your own constituency. So now imagine just billions of dollars. Let's say there's no Russia, there's no Saudi Arabia. No one tried to manipulate the system. We've cleared all the bad guys out. Now we just have their Facebook, we don't have bad apples, they don't have bad actors.

Tristan Harris: Okay. So we've got billions of dollars rushing into the system, flooding the system. But now we have this weird invisible sorting function like Moses just spreading the seas of society where it intrinsically has left leaning messages, reach left-leaning audiences more efficiently and more profitably and right-leaning messages leading to right leaning audiences. And then the way you continue to have to advertise is to get more and more extreme. So it's like Moses, it's sort of splitting the oceans of society. And I said in the testimony, this is really serious. This is like civil war accelerating polarization. "I mean the polarization dynamics are accelerating towards civil war level things. Hashtag civil war is coming. There's our colleague Renee DiResta says, 'If you can make it trend, you can make it true.' When you're planting these suggestions and getting people to even think those thoughts because you can manipulate the architecture. We're profiting, as I said, we're subsidizing our own self

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destruction. If the government doesn't say that these things can't just be profitable".

Tristan Harris: I want people to move from this kind of like, Oh, it's kind of fun. The technology is just a little bit addictive and we should really talk about that and fix that. It's like, no, no, no. This is an information and trust meltdown. We've democratized the capacity for politicians to advertise because now there's many more people advertising on Facebook.

Aza Raskin: Just say it's not inherently bad that political advertising is moving online. What's bad is that the online that we've constructed is one in which every dollar creates more division, and so as we move from having television based ads to online ads, every single one of those dollars makes us more divided and unable to stand together.

Tristan Harris: It's like a nuclear power plant that just had a meltdown in your society, but that nuclear power plant infrastructure was built into 2.7 billion people's societies, especially people like Maria Ressa, who we had on the podcast earlier in the Philippines saying,

Maria Ressa: "Filipinos spend the most time on the internet. Even though the speed is so horrible, we spend at least 10 hours a day on the internet. We embraced it, but we didn't realize that it would demand so much of us. We had no voice in how it developed. And the irony of course is that the values, American values that you built it with, has been completely turned upside down and it is been used by illiberal forces, people who want to control the information ecosystem."

Tristan Harris: It is definitely the case in countries like that, that it is the infrastructure of their society.

Aza Raskin: This sort of dark infrastructure, it's every dollar in creates, more division, every dollar, more division, every dollar in, division out. 2020 there is an estimated just in the U S alone, 2.8 billion dollars that is going to be spent on political ads. So that billion dollar number isn't a pie in the sky like abstract and billion dollars. This is going to happen this year.

Tristan Harris: It's really, really frustrating because we know that this is coming. This is what I was trying to tell members of Congress and senators is, sure, we absolutely want to protect against the new disinformation threats, the new deep fakes. But why don't we recognize the hypnotic spell that our society has been under for the last six or seven years. Let's say YouTube perfectly got rid of all the conspiracy theory issues and the outrage and the hate machine.

Tristan Harris: Our society has still undergone everywhere around the world, 2 billion people, six to seven years of that attention maximizing algorithm that basically said, let's tilt the world towards the outrage, the extreme stuff. And so you wonder why does the world just hate each other so much?

Aza Raskin: Well, it's obviously, it's the other side. They're the ones at fault, right?

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- Tristan Harris: It's always the other side, Aza.
- Aza Raskin: But that's sort of the point. It's not the other side. It's the pipes.
- Tristan Harris: Yeah.
- Aza Raskin: It's not the people. It's the pipes.
- Tristan Harris: It's not the people. It's the pipes.
- Aza Raskin: Yeah, it's all the alliteration today. Were there things that other people said that sort of got you angry and the sense of like a myth that you're like ugh.
- Tristan Harris: I love that question. There was one Congress member who had asked well haven't we always had manipulation and marketing and I have a supermarket in my hometown.
- Speaker 8: All of us go to the grocery store. When we're at the grocery store and you're in the checkout line, you get all these things up there that they're trying to get you to buy. You could argue that they're impulse items, but then again, you could also make the argument that when you get home you say, geez, I wish I would have gotten that at the grocery store. I wished I would've gotten these batteries, or band aids or whatever. How do you differentiate between what's harmful and what is beneficial?
- Tristan Harris: And there was an answer by one of their member on the panel. But I kind of jumped in and said, well actually there's many things that are very different about this.
- Tristan Harris: "The first is that this is infrastructure we live by. When we talk about children waking up in the morning and you have auto play, that's not like the supermarket where I occasionally go there and I just made some purchases and I'm at the very end of it. And that's the one moment, the one little micro situation of deception or marketing, which is okay, in this case we have children who are spending 10 hours a day.
- Tristan Harris: So imagine a supermarket, you're spending 10 hours a day and you wake up in that supermarket. So that's the degree of intimacy and sort of scope in our lives. That's the first thing. The second thing is the degree of asymmetry between the persuader and the persuadee. So in this case you've got someone who knows a little bit more about marketing, who's arranging the shelf space so that the things in the top at eye level versus a bottom level, that's one very small amount of asymmetry. But in the case of technology, we have a super computer pointed at your brain, meaning like the Facebook news feed sitting there and using the vast resources of 2.7 billion people's behavior to calculate the perfect thing to show you next and to not be discriminate about whether it's good for you, whether it's true, whether it's trustworthy, where that's credible and so it knows way more about your weaknesses than you and about yourself. And the degree of asymmetry is far beyond anything we've experienced."

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- Speaker 8: And you want the federal government to control that?
- Tristan Harris: There's just so many days it feels like Groundhog day, like why are we still having this conversation? Is it you and I feel like this is, we felt like this is just obvious. In the same way a tree's worth more dead as lumber than it's a tree. A whale's worth more dead than alive. A human is worth more if they're addicted outraged, narcissistic, polarized, and misinformed than if they are human being. It's just that simple. Let's now talk about what we do about it. And by the way, the cost of that isn't just that we're more narcissistic, misinformed, etcetera. It's that that's kind of a meltdown of the fabric of society. I don't think that we need to sit here and keep talking about the problem. I hope we don't have to.
- Tristan Harris: I really want to get to a world where we do something about it. And one of the things we talked about in the hearing was we already have existing federal bodies, legislative bodies, regulatory bodies, agencies to care about certain areas of society. We're simply not applying those existing laws and jurisdictions. We just need to apply the principles and jurisdictions and concerns of the physical world to the virtual world. So one way to deal with this would be to create a new digital agency. Something like an office of technology assessment that just regulates all of the harms emitted by technology, the polarization pollution, the distraction pollution, the narcissism pollution. But that's a lot of work for one brand new agency to regulate all of technology. Are you kidding me? That's never going to work. So what we proposed was what if we ask each agency we mandate a digital update "and just have them ask the questions that then are forced upon the technology companies to use their resources to calculate, report back, set the objection, set the goals for what they're going to do in the next quarter.
- Speaker 9: Thank you Mr Harris I yield.
- Tristan Harris: So, each one, health and human services department of education, national Institute of health gets to say, Hey, we care about let's say kids' mental health and addiction. Okay, well here's a fact. Unlike say the alcohol industry or the tobacco industry, they don't know which of their customers are addicted. Cigarette industry puts their product on a store shelf. They don't know exactly who's buying it. They don't know which people who are buying it are the addicted ones. Which ones use it in lightweight ways. What's different about technology? Well, they know exactly which users are using it because they have to login.
- Aza Raskin: Their customers are legible.
- Tristan Harris: Their customers are legible.
- Aza Raskin: To use the Lessig phrase.
- Tristan Harris: Yeah, and the patterns of use and the harms are legible too. So they actually can't claim that they don't know. They know exactly how many teens between 10 to 14 years old are actually using it.

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Tristan Harris: After two in the morning, they could report back on a number there. They know exactly how many people are addictively checking more than a hundred times a day. They know exactly how many kids are posting photos and then deleting them within one minute because they didn't get enough likes because they can actually see that pattern of use and imagine that the NIH or whoever would have jurisdiction over that area could say, Hey Facebook, it's your job to report to me cause I care about that. It's my area of purview. About how many people have that problem. And then each quarter your job Facebook is to reduce that number and every quarter I have power and authority to make sure that you're doing that and we can fine you if you either lie about it or you're not making the reductions within some reasonable mode of effort or outcome. There are actual legislative proposals to do with some of these things.

Aza Raskin: I want to hear the fast list of what are the legislative proposals to deal with some of these things Tristan?

Tristan Harris: Senator Markey has something called the kids act, which is the kids internet design safety act. They tackle some of the design features that are out of bounds. Things like auto play, quantifying popularity of people, push alerts, come back emails. Come back emails for those who don't know, here's a good test. If the tech companies who go in the world of addiction and they have those kinds of problems, the easiest thing they could do to prove that they're not trying to addict people and that they're not digital drug Lords is they could stop user resurrection or what it's called, comeback emails. That's like, you ever notice you go on vacation for a week, you come back from a week and you have way more emails from Facebook or Instagram or YouTube than they normally send you.

Tristan Harris: That's cause they were watching. They're like, Hmm, why did this user go offline? Why aren't they using it very much? I know. Let's seduce them back like a drug dealer and get them coming back. The easiest thing they could do to prove that they're not addictive designed companies is they could just not do come back emails. There's also rules around commercialization and marketing and the amplification of harmful content because YouTube for kids has been a real cesspool of this really dangerous stuff. I believe Senator Markey was also involved in the original children's TV act and this is just about bringing back a lot of those kinds of protections but for kids. There's also COPPA 2.0 which is the children's online privacy act bumping under age use from 12 to 15 years old because under age use is a big problem. I'm talking to Jonathan Haidt about that is it's really the younger teens who are especially are vulnerable to instant, constant rating by other people.

Tristan Harris: The feeling of being rated by other people constantly is a horrific thing to expose young kids to and nothing that we signed up for.

Aza Raskin: I always have this analogy which is imagine between you and your friends, you took bets to decide how much money your friends are going to make in the next year and you could also take puts against them. I think you're going to lose your job this year. I'm going to buy a bet against Tristan and just imagine how that would warp your friends group, it would really change the dynamics. That's

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also happening to our children. It is kind of like instinct grading and quantification of exactly how much people like or dislike you. I'm so glad that I did not grow up in that time period now. I grew up before.

Tristan Harris: It's hard enough being a teenager, right? I mean it's hard enough negotiating your identity and feeling the self-worth and figuring out who you are. To add this on top is just like a war zone. It's like a psychological war zone.

Aza Raskin: If I was to ask a congressperson one question, I think it might be, imagine if you took a stance against Facebook, something that Facebook didn't like and you're coming up for reelection and Facebook quietly down ranks you, not a lot, but just enough that your opponent wins. Would you even know?

Tristan Harris: I wouldn't know.

Aza Raskin: Yeah. That's sort of the point is that the only thing stopping complete capture of our government is our good faith in the leadership of these private companies and that's an untenable place to remain for long.

Tristan Harris: Even China doesn't want to allow Facebook into the country because it says, no, we look at what Facebook is doing around the world and it's kind of dismantling the fabric. We're not going to let that in here.

Aza Raskin: Yeah.

Aza Raskin: I think about Tik Tok, China having a direct conduit to control and own the culture of our youth. And if you just rewind the clock and you said, cool, actually China's going to subsidize and write all the textbooks for our kids, we'd be like, hell no, we are not going to allow that. But because it's an app that people are opting into, somehow it gets a free pass. We do not have digital borders.

Tristan Harris: Well exactly. I was saying during the hearing, we've protected the physical border. We left the digital border wide open. "Imagine a nuclear plant who said we're not going to actually protect the nuclear plants from Russian cyber-attacks. Well this is sort of like Facebook building the information infrastructure, not protecting it from any bad actors until that pressure is there." We actually let them build the infrastructure for our children's development, which is Tik Tok right?

Tristan Harris: They go into these countries and they build the ports and then they get them in debt and then they owe China. We would never let them do that in this country at least. And yet we're letting it happen over and over again and it's threatening the viability of the U S government and our culture as a culture that can out-compete close authoritarian regimes. Cause right now an open society means a distracted, narcissistic, outraged, misinformed society. Because we left the door wide open for manipulation and these business models and a closed society is a protected one.

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- Aza Raskin: Yeah. What were the Congress people's response?
- Tristan Harris: This is really important. I use this metaphor in briefing some of the members of Congress that there's kind of like these micro-targeted zip code size Pearl Harbors happening every single day. But you don't know because it's this sort of silent weapon that only hits those people.
- Tristan Harris: It's like those military weapons. You know that there's these Sonic weapons the military has where I can point it at you and I can actually turn up the volume and it'll be a piercingly loud sound, but only you will hear it. And if I move five inches away to your right,
- Aza Raskin: Can't hear anything.
- Tristan Harris: Can't hear anything. That kind of weapon is essentially what Facebook micro-targeting is, right? Except instead of doing it from a distance of 200 feet, I can do it from across the world and I can point this information weapon at a hundred conspiracy theorists and say, I'm going to dose this information to you. And then now I go walk to the representative of Nebraska or of Massachusetts and I say, by the way, representative did you know representative that Russia's targeting the U S military veterans in your zip code? And they'd say, no, I never heard about that.
- Tristan Harris: And then you tell them all this information, they're like, that sounds kind of like a conspiracy theory because I've never heard about that. But it's because I can keep micro-targeting your people and Russia, this is a real example. Russia has been found to be going after U S veteran military groups on Facebook and sewing disenchantment about all the spending and all these pointless Wars and all that. You could say, well that's all real, these are actual real facts. But the fact that there's all this manipulation going on is not commonly known and the representatives don't know this is happening. Well, who knows the surface area of where this is happening, who has the best access to both monitor where the harm is happening and where you would distribute the mass public awareness campaign.
- Aza Raskin: Yeah, it's the platforms themselves.
- Tristan Harris: Right? So why wouldn't they do it? And one of the examples I think I gave in the hearing is when there's a breach like Equifax and your data gets breached, there's law that forces you to notify each person who was breached. But when there's information operations that target you as a veteran and we later discovered them and we take down the accounts and we, Facebook doesn't go back to the people who had been affected and say, by the way, all these groups that you joined in this group and that group and those posts in those posts, that was all an information operation and the very presence of that simply showing up often and often and often would first be a deterrent for Facebook because now they would have a reason to not want to have to admit to people how often this is happening. And second, it would obviously create a culture of a kind of a cultural immune system where we would all be aware that this is happening much more often than we previously known.

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- Tristan Harris: Therefore, we wouldn't have to wait for representatives in the U S government in Washington, DC to have to know about it because we would all know about it in a bottom up decentralized way, which is much more powerful.
- Aza Raskin: We have this concept of an ad blocker which has a big whitelist or blacklist for things that I don't want to see and I really wish there was essentially an ad blocker, big whitelist or blacklist for coordinated inauthentic behavior. I want people like like Guillaume and Renee and all these brilliant researchers to be able to put into a centralized place the kind of content which is propaganda and then have it run in my browser, run on my phone and just block it or at least highlight in a different color so that we don't have to rely on Facebook getting it all right.
- Tristan Harris: Yeah. And that's really a great example of where a company like Apple is in the best position to do this because they're kind of the fiduciary to be the agent of protecting us and our limits of our minds.
- Tristan Harris: And then this whole world of manipulation that's sitting out there. So can you controlling the operating system and the apps and the notifications and the things that are coming in, they can act as a better steward and fiduciary agent of not just saying, well, who wants my attention but who's going to help with our values? And that's the relationship I'd love to see Apple step into.
- Aza Raskin: Is there something, Tristan that you wish you had said in the hearing that you did not?
- Tristan Harris: Yeah, I mean I opened by saying I'm here because I'm really concerned. "We're actually at the last turning point, kind of an event horizon where we either protect the foundations of our information and trust environment or we let it go away." And when I say something extreme like we're having a trust meltdown. It sounds extreme, right? It sounds like an exaggeration and you're not being specific. And I didn't really get a chance in the hearing to defend why that was true.
- Tristan Harris: So here's how I think is a good way to describe. Back in the 1990s newspapers thought that they were in the truth business. The product that they were selling was truth. Craigslist comes along and the internet and they realized, Oh crap, we weren't in the truth business. We were actually in the classifieds business. And then suddenly they had to go through this whole rejiggering to say, okay, well how do we make this business model work again? And they kind of leaned more on advertising. Okay, so now they're leaning on advertising and that's their support. Okay. But they still believe, well, no, we're in the truth business. We're selling truth. Okay. But then Facebook and YouTube and Twitter come along and they realized suddenly, Oh, we weren't in the truth business.
- Tristan Harris: We were in the attention business. And whether it's the Wall Street Journal or Fox News or in The New York Times, we're all having some kind of expensive process to generate what product ultimately human attention. Right. Okay. So anyway, let's imagine you've got this big black box in front of you. Black box A and let's say it's the Wall Street Journal. Inputs coming in. You've got a bunch of

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money and then you've got to pay all these journalists and these editors. You've got to pay people to do fact checking. You got to people to interview witnesses, you've got to pay people to double confirm things. You got to pay people to make moral decisions about what should go on the front page and let's do the word counts and let's update this and that. And you've got to pay advertising people to sort of say, well, what ads do we want are actually aligned with our values and how do we do this right?

Tristan Harris: What's going to make a lot of money? Sure, absolutely. But let's also make some other decisions. That's a lot of man power, human power, effort going into producing what ultimate outcome. A few articles that generate a certain amount of human attention. Okay. Now, let's look at how the tech industry, black box number two comes along and they say, let's say this is Twitter, and I don't mean this because I think Twitter diabolically thought this would be true, but from a business perspective, this is kind of what happened. Instead of paying all those journalists and human editors, those \$200,000 a year, \$100,000 a year salaries to do that work. What if we got each human being on earth to be narcissistically posting their news, their commentary, and photos of their cats and dogs and breakfasts, and they'll do that work for free. We don't have to pay them because we just show their friends the number of followers they have and now they'll actually just addictively come back and want to get as much attention for themselves as possible.

Tristan Harris: But what's really happened is that they've become kind of like the information or attention gig economy workers, they're like the Uber drivers, but they're driving around attention.

Aza Raskin: We have become the gig economy workers in the attention economy.

Tristan Harris: Each of us are free unpaid labor doing the work for free.

Aza Raskin: So it's actually worse than an Uber driver because we're not getting paid.

Tristan Harris: We're not even getting paid.

Aza Raskin: But we are getting rated.

Tristan Harris: But we are getting rated exactly, by our friends, not even for how the quality of the effort that we provide. And so now you zoom out, okay, and you imagine that, let's say black box A the expensive news creating process used to be the process that generated our information environment, right? It went through some gatekeepers. I'm not saying it's perfect by the way. I'm not trying to romanticize it and say it didn't have problems.

Tristan Harris: There's lots of problems. There's narrative control, gate keeping, unethical moral decision making, a whole bunch of stuff. Power, power symmetries, okay? But there was a process that generated our information environment. But then imagine you zoom out and you do like the Indiana Jones swap. And so instead of the first black box generating the information environment, now you have the

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second black box generating our information environment. So now instead of quality researched, investigated, reflective, thoughtful, historically contextualized information, we have hot takes, cynical commentary, breaking news, all caps, outrage. Because you win for a totally different set of reasons when you're operating in the second black box.

Aza Raskin: Right, yeah.

Tristan Harris: And that becomes the basis of our entire information environment. So the problem statement is not that we have these bad deep fakes or we have this bad disinformation, it's that we've replaced the entire information ecology with bullshit.

Tristan Harris: And that is the thing, when I say there's an information trust meltdown is the thing I really want people to get.

Aza Raskin: It's not that we've just replaced it with bullshit. Sometimes it is good information coming from your friends.

Tristan Harris: That's right.

Aza Raskin: And so that makes it really hard because you've entangled entwined-

Tristan Harris: Simultaneous utopia and dystopia. All the voices that didn't get to be heard got to be heard. But all of outrage, narcissism, conspiracy theories, toxicity also won. And it's so intertwined. And if you look at it as a kind of zooming out to the population dynamics, what percentage is the brilliant stuff? How many people are experiencing brilliant Twitter or beautiful Twitter or loving Twitter or, deep reflective, amazing, better, amazingly better sense-making, Twitter than we had before versus how many people are experiencing angry Twitter, narcissism Twitter, outrage, Twitter, conspiracy Twitter, and especially polarization Twitter.

Tristan Harris: At the very least what we know is that polarization wins in that world and that is so dangerous. The polarization trend is the thing that I think as well is getting traction on Capitol Hill, everyone's worried about it. No one wants to live in a world where you can't talk to people and that's why we're doing this podcast in my view is we can't just say, let's stop the new bad information. We actually have to wake up like the matrix, but through enough layers we actually have to go back in time and pop through layer by layer, by layer, by layer. We've been under this spell this illusion of everybody hates each other. We can't agree it's not true. We've just been under like six and a half, seven years of automated attention and all it knows is Alex Jones tends to work really well so it gets 15 billion views.

Tristan Harris: So all of that we've been simmering and marinating 2 billion people's minds like in the pot and it's been marinating in there for like six years and now you pop up and you say, this is the real world. Well it's actually cause this illusion became delusion because the weird beliefs that we've been holding in our brains started

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showing up in votes started showing up and not vaccinating our kids, started showing up in shootings because of hate speech on the internet being amplified and now we say that's normal. Oh those are just people. That's just a mirror, but it's not a mirror. As you say, it's a fun house mirror.

Aza Raskin: It's a fun house mirror.

Tristan Harris: But again, how do you reboot from this? I really think it's about people seeing this process, clarity of understanding. You can see the thing that's happened and you can stand above it. Saying, oh, this is why all that other stuff down there was running through my brain for everyone.

Tristan Harris: All of us, me included. Right?

Aza Raskin: Clarity in some sense is exactly like a breath of fresh air in the sense that as you lose oxygen, you also lose the ability to know that you're losing oxygen. Your mind becomes fuzzy and vague.

Tristan Harris: Clarity is like a breath of air where you actually get to see again and you have your full perceptual senses back.

Aza Raskin: Exactly, and you have a limited amount of time in which to act before you lose it again.

Tristan Harris: Right. That's brilliant. That's brilliantly said.

Aza Raskin: I actually have a question for our audience, which is, well you'll listen to the podcast and if you watch the testimony, I'm super curious what questions you think we missed or what questions you would ask because this will not be the last time that Mr. Harris goes to Washington and would love to, in a sense crowdsource really stellar questions to get to the heart of the problem.

Aza Raskin: Send us your ideas on Twitter, or you can send us emails or even voice notes at undivided@humanetech.com.

Aza Raskin: The other reason why I'm asking our audience for questions is I think it's in a sense on us as technologists, not to repeat that meme of government's too slow or too stupid and doesn't get it, but rather to ask the question to how can we upgrade the capacity of our government?

Tristan Harris: Right and so per, EO Wilson, we have paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions, and godlike technology. Humane technology is we have to embrace our paleolithic emotions, upgrade our medieval institutions, and have the wisdom to wield God-like technology. And the way that we upgrade medieval institutions is we have to invest in them. And there's great organizations out there like Tech Congress, which is actually placing technologists in government. And I've met many of them and they're super talented and there's a lot of people in government who do get it.

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- Tristan Harris: But there's also a lot of people in government. And so there needs to be a lot more education out there. And so if you listeners are interested in that, there's a huge need for more talented technologists to go into government and to help educate.
- Aza Raskin: It took me a long time to retrain my mind cause I've been in the startup game for so long that it'd be like, Oh here's a problem in the world. I bet the best way to solve it, the only way to solve it is to make a product to replace that with a different set of playbooks. And so if you're thinking about developing an app as your next thing, why not think about finding a place in Tech Congress like in Congress, in government that you can apply what we know about how technology actually works to the protection side.
- Tristan Harris: I mean I was really grateful to see this study by Upturn. It's hard to do this work and different academic departments in different groups. Disinfo labs, STRATCOM DC, Graphika, Harvard, Kennedy School. I mean there's so many different nonprofits, civic society groups that are doing the research that powers the kind of hearings and insights that we're trying to spread and just want to put a large thank you out there to all those groups, especially this month on Upturn for this polarization study that I think is instrumental for people to see the harms that are intrinsic to the business model.
- Aza Raskin: And the thanks I'd like to give is to Rebecca Lendl actually on our team. She and Randy Fernando in the last year have really built the organizational capacity for our team and it's gone from feeling like it's just five of us.
- Tristan Harris: Just grabbing by the seat of our pants.
- Aza Raskin: To actually starting to have enough resources that we can respond to emails, get back to all the people that we need to get back to and tackle this problem so just a huge set of appreciations to Rebecca.
- Tristan Harris: I love this habit of gratitude and I also feel incredibly grateful to the two of them and that it gives us the capacity to work much more with the whole set of people that are working in this space. For those listening who work on these topics, it's not that we don't want to answer your email, it's that we're just been so overloaded and so we're really excited this coming year to help build much broader coalitions and take this problem on with everyone holding our hands together.
- Aza Raskin: Your Undivided Attention is produced by the Center for Humane Technology. Our executive producer is Dan Kedmey and our associate producer is Natalie Jones. Noor Al-Samarrai helped with the fact checking. Original music and sound designed by Ryan and Hays Holladay and a special thanks to the whole Center for Humane Technology team for making this podcast possible.
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