Social Dilemma with Tristan Harris (S2 Ep. 11)

SPEAKERS
Tristan Harris, Coleman Hughes (CH)

CH 00:30
Welcome to another episode of conversations with Coleman. My guest today is Tristan Harris. Tristan is a computer scientist and president of the Centre for Humane Studies. He was named to Time One Hundreds next leader shaping the future, and Rolling Stone Magazine's 25 people shaping the world. He's the co-host of Your Undivided Attention consistently among the top 10 tech podcasts on Apple. Tristan was also the primary subject of the acclaimed Netflix documentary, The Social Dilemma, which we talked about in this episode, Tristan and I talked about the problems created by social media both for our individual happiness, and for the health of society as a whole. So without further ado, Tristan Harris. Tristan Harris, thank you so much for coming on my show.

Tristan Harris 01:54
Pleasure to be here. Coleman, good to talk to you.

CH 01:56
So I think probably a lot of my listeners will have heard of you either through Sam Harris's podcasts several years ago, or more likely through the documentary that came out a few months ago called The Social Dilemma. And you are featured prominently in that documentary and the quote that's circulated about us that you're the closest thing Silicon Valley has to a conscience is a great quote that you've probably heard it

Tristan Harris 02:24
I don't think can possibly be lived up to an immortal form. It's a blessing and a curse in that quote.

CH 02:31
So how did you get to be who you are right now? How did you get to be worrying about these problems of social media and what it's doing to our attention, and so on?

Tristan Harris 02:43
Yeah well first it's exciting to talk to you as we were just chatting beforehand. I first heard you on Sam Harris's podcast. And it sounds like you first heard me there as well. And I think that's actually a good starting point for how I got to be engaged in these topics, because actually don't get to go back to the philosophy of where this word came from very often. And when Sam and I talked in that interview, I talked a lot more about my background in persuasion, and in cults, in the psychology of cults and groupthink. And so, I guess if I give a rundown of some of my more well known background, I, when I was a kid, I was a magician, I loved magic, and going to the magic store with my mother when I was pretty, pretty young, and was fascinated by how this magic was a field in which being an adult didn't

make you more immune to the magic. A lot of people think of magic as kind of something that only those kids fall for something like that, but it was actually kind of independent of the intelligence of the spectator. And it really said something profound about the human mind being more vulnerable to influence than we give it credit for. So it was a huge part of me growing up, I went to a camp and magic camp with a bunch of magicians when I was pretty young and studied it. And then later, in my background at Stanford, I studied computer science and worked at Apple and did user interface engineering and was really fascinated by human computer interaction, which was my focus of discipline at Stanford. My advisor was Terry Winograd, who's a very famous AI researcher, it was also the adviser of Larry Page from Google. And so I was taking all these lessons of persuasion, psychology, perception, how does the mind work? How does the mind process information? How does that relate to how computing and technology influence phenomenology and the meaning making systems that govern you know, our 24/7experience of reality? And then it was really my senior year at Stanford, or actually my first year of my graduate programme that I took a class with Professor BJ Fogg, who you know, as the film The Social Dilemma talks about ran a lab called the Stanford Persuasive Technology Lab, in which he took everything we knew from the psychology of persuasion and influence. These are things like Robert is it Robert Greene's 48 Laws of Power, Robert Cialdini is influenced book, you know, How to Win Friends and Influence People, slot machines, casino design, clicker training for dogs things like this and applying that to technology. How would you make technology influence our attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. And it's so important to always anchor any of the issues that we want to accuse technology of causing in society. It's easy to talk about data or privacy or anti trust, or maybe it's not easy, but this is certainly the ones that dominate more public attention. But what often doesn't get nearly as much attention is just what is technology doing or influencing on us on a daily basis? How is it pulling the strings on the human psyche? And is it gaining a greater capacity to do that over time, and that really is the foundation of what the film The Social Dilemma was trying to unpack. And it's really the foundation of our work in the Centre for Humane Technology where the word humane is in reference to asymmetries of power, where there is a persuasive, strong influence effect of technology over us. And we have to identify what an ethical, asymmetric or persuasive relationship between technology and you know, the human psyche would look like.

CH 05:57
So I know you've told the story a thousand times, but can you briefly go over what you tried to do at Google and how it landed?

Tristan Harris 06:06
Yes, so I was a technology entrepreneur. So first of all, I left Stanford, I started a tech company called Apture. I tried I raised venture capital, I say this because I think oftentimes, people hear about technology, critics of technology, or social media who, oh, they just don't understand, you know, how we in the tech industry actually do things. And what was different a little bit about my story is, I was friends with a lot of the people who built some of these products. In fact, when going to college with the founders of Instagram, and starting a tech company myself, and going through that process with many people of my cohort, that year, I'm the same age as Mark Zuckerberg. So a lot of people in my classmates were going off to work at Facebook in the early days. And I say all that because when I landed at Google through the sort of failed, it was sort of a talent acquisition of our failed startup, they acquired us and my team, I became interested in what all of my friends, I felt like we're caught up in

this, this treadmill, which was to sort of meet the venture capital goals of growing to 10 100x of your users and getting to, you know, lots of engagement, lots of time spent. And that I saw this kind of lie that we were telling ourselves in the tech industry, that we our mission was to make the world more open and connected, you know, we can blah, blah, blah, say what we want. That's what our stated mission or goal is, at the end of the day, the metrics that the engineers measured, was really about engagement in time. So when I was at Google, and I was a product manager on the Gmail team, I just became concerned with the industry more at large, it really wasn't just Google that I was concerned about, it was the industry at large. But here I was within, you know, one of the largest, most influential tech companies on the planet. And I made a presentation. That said never before in history have, you know, 50 designers at a handful of tech companies basically determined the collective psyche that the collective attention economy, that 2 billion people experience when they're jacked into our current digital set of applications, social media, email, text, messaging, etc. and that this was broadly downgrading, or diminishing and degrading different aspects of social life from trust, to relationship quality to mental health to addiction and distraction, productivity focus, and that presentation in going viral at Google and I became a design ethicist, which I want to call up Google for generously giving me that space to do that work. Because for about two to three years, I was trying to change Google from the inside. I did ultimately leave though, because I saw that in general, the business, the business model of the whole industry was in conflict with many of the things that we were, that I was concerned about, and was starting to write and speak about.

CH 08:36
Yeah, that's something that hangs over the whole documentary and your work in general, which is the fact that a company that operates on an incentive structure that, as you often say, is selling our attention as the product because we nominally use these social media platforms for free, they actually don't have the incentive structure that makes it possible to reform themselves. And the analogy that really struck me you know, kept coming up while I was watching the documentary was just the analogy of food or candy companies. And I remember my mother growing up, she grew up in a very poor background in the Bronx. And she ended up escaping poverty and working at a marketing company at M&M Mars and was very high up. And one day, she walked into the boardroom, and they were speaking about where the metrics on the candy on the Mars bars, whatever they were selling in the 80s. And they said that they were very happy because they were quote, over indexing on kids from her neighbourhood in the Bronx. And that was a point of celebration. And that's one way to frame it. Another way to frame it is we're selling a lot of candy to poor kids that aren't eating breakfast, and aren't aware of the long term ramifications of too much sugar consumption. And you know, it's it's akin to asking a company like that which is filled with normal people, right, not evil masterminds, hell bent on giving the world diabetes, but it's akin to asking them to regulate themselves and to sort of voluntarily scale back this insane drug, you know, called sugar. And so that that analogy of sort of food and candy, it kept recurring to me while watching The Social Dilemma, is that a parallel you think makes sense?

Tristan Harris 10:35
Yeah, in fact, deeply because one of the books that I read early on in this work, I think it was like 2012, or 13, was salt, sugar fat by Michael moss at the New York Times where he talks about the history of the food industry, basically, as a game theoretic contest between who can basically more cleverly combine just three simple ingredients, salt, sugar, and fat, and that the more interesting almost like we

too, you know, what does it drug discovery and AI, where you like, have the AI sort of calculate new combinations of things to sort of figure out what kind of drugs would solve various health issues in society? This is sort of the opposite, where you have food companies figuring out Hey, can we actually change the what's called the mouthfeel of Cheetos? Can we have it dissolve faster? Can that get people to eat more, hey, if we mechanically tenderise meat, do people chew more of it and buy more McDonald's because half the chewing has been done by a machine that's tenderising the meat for them before they eat it, you end up with cereal where they combine different kind of elements together. And in general, it's this race to sort of reverse engineer the gustatory aspects of the human sort of nervous system to be maximally responsive. And much like in the attention economy, where there's a finite amount of attention that each of these companies in the digital sphere is competing for, you know, can YouTube get the 30 minutes? Or can Netflix get the 30 minutes. In this case, in the food environment, there's a finite stomach, Sharon needs to talk about it that stomach share, and it's a win lose game. So if they don't take it, the other guys will. And in fact, there was in this book, sell sugar fat documenting, I think it was an either in the late 90s, or might have happened twice. They had all the food companies gather and kind of a meeting, like you're talking about where they basically said, Hey, can we regulate ourselves? Are we causing diabetes, they actually had food scientists talk about the trends of increasing diabetes, increasing obesity. And they said, do we have a role in this. And there was an attempt to try to create almost like a Geneva Convention for putting caps on the amount of salt, sugar and fat in these products. And in fact, one of the CEOs it becomes a classic multipolar trap, where if I don't do it, the other guys will end. So it's a race for who has the least ethic, the least ethics, basically who's most sociopathic who's willing to just simply do the thing that works at getting the kids to, you know, eat the Mars bars or whatever, or getting the teenage kids to addicted to looking at photos of their friends. And in the case here, I think it was General Mills, Betsy Hall, I can't remember the name of the CEO, but she put limits of the amount of salt, sugar and fat in her food company. And they did that at the same time that their competitors products, actually increased revenues, theirs flatlined. And there was a literally document in the book a call with wall, the Wall Street analysts who said, hey, why is your revenue, flatlining? And the CEO explained that they put in these limits for salt, sugar and fat, they actually kicked out the CEO, remove the caps in salt, sugar and fat and went back to business as usual. And this is very reflective of what we're seeing in technology where Facebook adopted this phrase time well spent, which is some of the four years ago version of some of our work the Centre for Humane Technology, and they supposedly change their mission statement of Facebook to not maximise for time spent. But then ultimately, they ended up kind of repealing the limits on time spent that they were willing to sacrifice. And they're kind of going back to maximising time on site, which is exactly what got us into this situation in the first place.

CH 13:50
Yeah. And I think there's another parallel to and you mentioned this, I think it was you that mentioned it in the documentary, which is just that we're just like, we're hardwired to just crave sugar, and in the environment, we would have evolved in, you probably you probably were never finding anything sweeter than an apple, you know, we're hardwired to crave connection. And, you know, seeing what our friends are up to, and being on the constant seesaw of social approval and disapproval. And there's no, there's really no getting rid of this completely. Like it's it would be totally naive to think that we can get rid of social media. But it seems like what we've done with food is we, especially in the past, I think 20 or 30 years, we've created a culture where it's known that candy is bad for you, where it's normal to

set limits on how much you give to your kids, and just through the process of raising awareness have built a culture that acts as a counterweight to our instincts here. And I think I sort of beginning to see that happening around technology. You know, I have one friend who has some app on her phone that makes the whole thing black and white, to be sort of less appealing, I'm sure you know of a lot of tools people are using like this, are you? Have you been sort of behind the scenes of the creation of any of these kinds of things that are what can you tell my listeners about these kind of tools to save your attention?

Tristan Harris 15:20
Um, yeah, I mean, there's certainly a conversation about personal habits that we can all adopt. But I think, just want to zoom in first on the thing you said a second ago, which is that these parts of ourselves are not going away, you know, the, our attraction to salt, sugar and fat are going to be there for the rest of time, as I remember talking to Sam on his podcast four or five years ago, saying, you know, imagine you can beam enlightenment down into an ant body, you know, and so the, the ant like wakes up and its eyes sort of like blow up, you know, open up, and it sort of has the knowledge of the universe that has Einstein's theories of physics and everything. And it's still trapped in a man's body. So if those pheromones come along, it's still going to do and want what an ant doesn't want, right? And we're, I think, an interesting reflection of that same impulse, we have the primal lower level parts of ourselves. They're not going away. Tribalism is built into who we are. It's a survival mechanism. It's an adaptable mechanism. But you have technology that is weaponizing tribalism and replacing epistemology with, you know, how do we know what we know, with tribalism, and that's been very, very toxic for information environment, you have technology that's playing with our dopamine variable schedule awards, that's the slot machine dynamic of if you pull a lever, and sometimes you get a reward, and sometimes you don't, and there's actually a time schedule and the more variable, the reward, both in magnitude and in terms of time, like when it comes back, the more addictive it is, that's all part of how the human mind and psyche sort of just fundamentally operate, the best we can do is become aware of it. And in fact, the kind of gift is that we're the only species that if we were to do something like this, where we created an environment that is entirely maladaptive. We're also the only species with the capacity to literally rip this the screen off of our own operating system, point our intelligence back at ourselves and say, oh, there's facts about my own brain, that I can sort of choose to make my environment work with those facts about how my brain works. And that's where technology is breaking down. Now, because you know, your friend who's doing the black and white screen, they're effectively because they know this knowledge about their brain and the colours, you know, which are chosen, by the way, you know, the red is a trigger colour. And that's why notifications are red, because they are faster, attracting your attention. I literally have a friend who has a big tech company that people would know, they tried changing the notification colour to blue, and it didn't get nearly as many click throughs as when it was red. And the point is that you're, you know, classically just trapped in this game of how the human psyche works. And if they don't do their bed notification colour, and the other apps do to the red notification colour, then they're going to lose. So again, it becomes this multipolar trap where if I don't do it, the other guy will, which we'll probably get into is the root of so many problems that we're experiencing today, whether it's in food, autonomous weapons, climate change, right, it's just multipolar traps are everywhere. But again, we're the only species that can know this about ourselves. So I think the premise is not that we can get rid of the technology or we can get rid of our desire for connection or social validation, or tribalism. The question is, what is the healthy

expression of those things? What is healthy tribalism? What is healthy social validation? What is healthy novelty seeking? And that's, I think, a conversation about what is humane to our own fundamental, you know, weaknesses. So when it comes to tools, I mean, we can certainly talk about that I'm not really an expert in all the various things. But I will say that the reason that Android phones, which is you know, probably more than a billion phones out there now automatically late at night, shift into grayscale, as you flip towards the later hours of the evening, is actually due to some of the advocacy that we've been pushing for many years. And so these digital wellbeing initiatives that Apple launched on the iPhone, where you have screen time management features, time limits for kids, black and white, you know, reduce notifications, Do Not Disturb. There's been a more rapid building out of those features on both iOS and on Android, in large part, I think due to people's raising awareness about these things. But again, we have to be really careful about how we define the problem. Because if the problem is just the seven deadly sins are surrounding our psyche at a daily moment, and it's just addiction, that's the problem. That's not the same as the way that it is arranging our culture and our understanding of each other, which is really where my primary concerns are right now.

CH 19:20
Yeah, I want to get to that in a moment. There's one point that's addressed at the end of the documentary that I think is it's definitely the most reasonable pushback against this narrative. And I'm not really sure what I think about it, but it's sort of the golden era fallacy, or I think the more precise way to put it is, you know, is social media sort of a break in history, where the degree to which our attention is being weaponized and our psychology is being manipulated, is so different from what we've had in the past that it's worth conceiving as a separate phenomenon. Or is it just have a piece with the fact that we've had, you know, manipulating commercials on television for decades. And before that there are sort of guys on the street trying to sell you things. And it's sort of part of this overarching, slow March. That is not fundamentally different from the ways people have been manipulating other psychologies for 1000s of years. So what do you make of that?

Tristan Harris 20:26
Yeah, I think we should steal man, the critiques here. So the idea that we've obviously always had, or shall we say, there's many moral panics throughout history about every medium, from books, to television, to radio, to video games, to bicycles. We have had also persuasion and manipulation that has existed for a long time, the documentary century of the self by Adam Curtis, going through the history of Edward Bernays and who is Sigmund Freud's nephew, is a really great sort of description of a four hour documentary of all the different ways that human beings have conceived of their own identity and how that's been manipulated by marketers and advertisers over a long period. But what's new here is, and when we say manipulation, I want to caution listeners to not think about advertisements, I want them to think about the environment that is their daily social media environment. So think of you know, there you are in Tik Tok. That's a manipulated environment. There you are in YouTube, it's a manipulated environment. There you are in Facebook groups, that's a manipulated environment. So it's about what are the dimensions of the manipulation, that are accessible. So you use a computer metaphor, there's different you know, like, back in the days on computers, you'd be able to change the read-write access or give different permissions to different kinds of users. So like, what level of permissions to manipulate different aspects of the human psyche or you granted in different mediums. So a book had very limited abilities to influence you. I mean, you could be a very persuasive writer,

and a person would have to pick up that book, they'd have to choose to buy that book, they'd have to dwell on that book, they'd have to be convinced by those ideas. And so that's one environment. But if you compare that to being in say, Tik Tok or YouTube, when you hit play on a YouTube video, and you think you're just gonna watch this one video, and then you've got to go back to, you know, the report that you're writing, what that misses is the asymmetry of power between what YouTube knows about you, and what you think you know about yourself, which is that you're gonna watch this one video, which is to say that when you hit play, YouTube basically has looked at a 2 billion users, and has trillions of examples of data points about how those 2 billion users were affected by different kinds of media. So for example, let's say you watch a Jordan Peterson video, which by the way, he was one of the most recommended people on YouTube, like across the entire board for YouTube for a long time, YouTube would have all these examples that if you started with the Jordan Peterson video, there's a certain set of next videos, that would work really well at keeping your attention. And it has literally seen, it's just AB tested in, you know, a to z tested all the different variations and it knows exactly which video is most likely to keep you for the next hour. And you don't know that because you're you haven't played those 3 billion games of chess and YouTube supercomputer has played those 3 billion games of chess. So that's why when you hit play, and you think you're going to be done, and you end up staying there for another couple of hours, whether that's on Tik tok, or Netflix recommending the next thing, and there's different degrees to which these guys are doing it. But I would say that Facebook, Twitter and in Tik Tok are great examples. Instagram is another good example, where they're just really good at predicting the next thing to lower you and to dangle in front of your nervous system. And that when the computers know more about your weaknesses than you know about yourself, which is really that what's frequently the case, that's when we should be alarmed. That's what you've all Harare, the author of Sapiens. And I have done a lot of public speaking about because that's essentially I think the way to think about what's gone wrong in this arrangement is the degree of asymmetry of power and what the computer is able to influence and know about us that we don't know about ourselves. In the case of Facebook, for example, the groupthink in the controlling of what it looks like everyone else around me believes is a new form of persuasion, because it creates this sort of sealed container, an echo chamber, you know, I have people that I know who are in the dark arts of the manipulation machines, and they would literally Tell me, like, I can just create an echo chamber around you where it looks like everywhere you go, everyone is saying the same thing. And they can identify the kind of emotional chords that will resonate with you. So if you have an authoritarian personality, they can dose you with the things that resonate with authoritarian personalities. If you're the kind of person who tends to trust what your other friends are saying and specific friends, it knows how to leverage those facts about you. And so that's, that's really, again, a different kind of species of persuasion and power. That isn't, again, not about the advertisement that Nike Just do it. It's more about the daily 24 seven influence that these things operate with.

CH 24:42
Yeah, that's a point that I really want to linger on just the articles that come into your newsfeed, whether on Facebook, or Twitter. And I remember at one point, Twitter did not have this kind of algorithm and then sort of chose to change over to it to an algorithm that really was more focused on not having a timeline of tweets that was organised simply by the time it was tweeted, but by the salience of the tweet for based on some algorithm that is designed to keep you on Twitter. And this is one of the most troubling aspects of social media. In my opinion, I think it's, it's having horrible consequences for the

country. The analogy someone uses in the documentary is, is to Wikipedia. And you know, when you see a Wikipedia article, everyone else is seeing the same article. And you can, you can still disagree about it in a totally deep and spirited way. But at minimum, you're reading the same article. Whereas when you search something on Google, or when you just check your Facebook timeline, to get your daily download of the news, you're seeing a just a different set of facts from other people and a set of facts that is partly tailored simply based on where you are. And it makes it very difficult to talk to people about politics. And it's increasingly something I don't do in my personal life. Because if I'm talking to my friend about politics, Yes, exactly. We're both talking about politics in the abstract, but we've seen different movies, right, we've seen it, we've seen different movies, and now we're trying to have an argument about what we thought about the movie. Yep. And we've just literally seen different cuts of it. And it's crazy making. And that's what the entire country has become. So talk a little bit about that.

Tristan Harris 26:37
Yeah, this this really is where we focus most of our attention, because it's really the invisible existential kind of level threat. Because whether we care about climate change, which we have very limited time to take a world war two level degree of mobilisation to have a hope of, of dealing with, or you take racial injustice, you take inequality, all of these things depend on having some shared view of reality, that is increasingly impossible to find. Because, as you said, it's not just that today, if you go to social media, you're seeing a different set of newsfeed facts and posts than someone else has seen. But we have to think about this as over the last 10 years, we have been deranged into a narrower and more salacious view of reality. There's actually a great group that we just interviewed for our podcast, called More In Common, do you know More In Common, their work?

CH 27:27
No, I don't.

Tristan Harris 27:28
They did this fantastic set of studies called perception gap. And basically perception gap is measuring how accurate our perceptions are of each other. And how does that change with the more we use social media. So specifically, I don't have the stat, the main stat I was looking for in front of me, but it's basically what percentage of people hold extreme views, I think people estimate it's like 55, or 65%. And the actual percentage is closer to 30%. But social media obviously, both has the people who will participate with the most extreme views, they speak more often, they share the most salacious stuff. And then on top of that, social media actually rewards and keeps them around so that they snowball those posts snowball longer because they're better at keeping attention. In fact, it's probably worth going back to the thing you were saying a second ago, which is when you remember the days when Twitter did not actually have this algorithmic feed where it was choosing and calculating which things to show you. And instead, it showed you what's called reverse chronological, so sorted by the thing that was posted most recently, five seconds ago, then 10 minutes ago, then 20 minutes ago. So you take, you know, all the people that you follow, and then you just sort them by time. That's how Twitter used to work. That's how Facebook used to work. And I remember being at South by Southwest, the big media technology festival in Austin, Texas, back in 2009. And I was there with the designers of Facebook and with Twitter. And this was the year that Facebook saw Twitter as one of its big competitors. And one of the things that they did is they were competing to figure out who could be the most instant place to

share information. So they that was when they were racing for that kind of most recent post kind of version of the newsfeed. But then if you if you care in the long run about keeping people's attention, you actually have to do this sort of relevance calculation of like, what are the tweets over the last 48 hours that people you followed have gotten the most engagement. And let's make sure we put those at the top. So that's where you get the Twitter you know, in case you missed it, and then it highlights these drama snowballs, I call them drama snowballs, because they're selecting for the thing that's most outrageous. And then it makes them persist. And I think that also helps see some of the derangement that's happened in culture. There's lots of things that are dramatic or warrant outrage. You know, if you're driving down a freeway, and a car passes you for a second and you say you get angry that car, but then it's a momentary anger. You don't bring 200 other people or 1000 other people or 10,000 other people into that moment of outrage. And so it's both momentary and transient for you, and it's transient for everyone else. But in the case of social media, if there's sort of a drive by moment of outrage, It suddenly becomes persistent to the if you think about the half life, the half life stays around much longer on Twitter, because it's good at getting both your attention and also everyone else's attention to create a conversation. And you start to see how we have selected in an evolutionary sense for the most dramatic snowball kind of memes. And then piled had more and more people pile on. And you wonder how dynamics around cancelled culture or call out culture kind of interplay with these kinds of things. And I think that we don't often acknowledge the ways in which social media has been trained some of these other cultural habits, or at least have co evolved with those habits, and in ways that have been really toxic. Now, to get back to the perception gap, one of the things that they found is that the longer you use social media, the worse you are at estimating the other side's perspective. And there's differences actually, between Democrats and Republicans, they did the study in the US, specifically an example, by the way that comes from Florida State University on these misperceptions we have with each other because of what's shown to us in our news feeds. If you ask Republicans to estimate the percentage of democrats that are LGBTQ, they'll estimate that about a third of Democrats are LGBTQ, but the actual number is 6%. And if you ask Democrats to estimate what percentage of Republicans earn more than $250,000 a year, they'll also say, actually a little bit more than a third 38% of Republicans earned more than 230 $1,000 a year, but the reality is just 2% do. And then if you actually look at the more, there's actually some other subtle trends in their in their research, which I recommend people check out a perception gap.us the more educated democrats are, the worse they are at estimating percentages of beliefs that are held on the other side. for Republicans, the more educated you are, you don't actually get worse at estimating either side. But you're also not good to begin with. But this some interesting sort of subtle dynamics there. And of course, again, the more you use social media in general, the worse you are at identifying the other sides. And both of these, these things create these vicious spirals. Because the people who are most engaged in political issues, spend the most time reading and watching and listening to media that portrays the other side as being extreme. This increases hostility, distrust and widens the perception gap, it makes each other It makes these different groups see each other more as enemies, and they start believing they need to win at all costs. They start making excuses for their own side when there's hypocrisy, and sort of the cycle kind of gets worse and worse. And I think that's really the core derangement that social media has created in society. And again, it comes back to this attention based business model. Because if they weren't competing so aggressively for attention, they wouldn't have ended up in this hyper personalised delivery of reality.

CH 32:31

Okay, there's, there's so much in there that I want to talk about. One of the first and most troubling things I noticed about the moral of that story you just told, which I agree with, is that it suggests that becoming more informed is not the answer. That is going to work at scale, like not normally when we think we have political problems in this culture in this country, we have a political culture that we want to improve. We have crazy riots happening, people storming the Capitol, people destroying small businesses and cities. There's something that every American of conscience wants to fix at this moment. And usually, the default answer to that question is, well, we've got to get more informed, you know, an informed population is the backbone of a democracy and all of these cliches about how important it is to read the newspaper, and so on and so forth and know what's going on in the world. What this suggests is that, at least at the moment, tribal bias runs so deep, that recommending people get more informed, may even exacerbate the problem, which is a scary thought, because it's just it means the problem is much more difficult to solve than even that solution suggests. It's not a problem of intelligence. It's not a problem of working harder to get more information. It's a much deeper problem. I have an important documentary I'd like to share with you. It's called better left unsaid. better left unsaid is a timely film that explores the dangerous tactics of political extremism and identity politics, and explores how these trends are affecting society. It features interviews with people like Noam Chomsky, Steven Pinker, Douglas, Murray, myself, and many more. The film is worth your time. So if you'd like to gain access to it, I'll have their link in the description. Once again, this called better left unsaid.

Tristan Harris 34:36

I would be careful about how we're defining getting more informed because I think specifically what the study referred to was your use of social media. Now I'm sure the more you look at hyper partisan media, whether it's MSNBC or Fox News or radio, extreme partisan radio, the ability to perceive accurately the other side would also be bad. However, I do think that there's different kinds of getting informed. I mean, we all had long form, to our podcast debates between some of the most constructive synthesis oriented steel Manning their opponents perspective discussions, I think we would be better off. And that's actually I think, why podcasts and frankly, what you're doing, and I've listened to a couple of the podcast episodes that you've done, that's what this medium I think can afford us to do. It's really social media's podcast. And keep in mind, it's not like the next moment of the word that I say, is tuned, based on an AI where right now for whoever's listening to this, it's not as if I'm using an AI to calculate the perfect next thing I can say, to keep your attention. So you keep listening to me, I'm just having a conversation with you. And that is the difference between this sort of engagement to engagement optimised media versus a different kind of informed based media. Now, I do think we have to ask what is the most constructive democratic form of media that tends to, you know, help us reduce perception gaps, one of the coolest things about the work have more in common is that you can create an objective measure for whether media actually increases perception gaps, or decreases it because if I say, how big a problem is policing, you know, in some of these areas of the United States, targeting different groups, it's hard, people are going to debate that. But if you actually ask Democrats, what percentage of Republicans believe that there is a problem with policing, and they actually overestimate that how many don't think it's a problem, we can actually get an objective measure, essentially, of how accurate we are at interpreting each other's beliefs. So that's, that's a really cool promising result, because you can imagine a study that showed that there's certain kinds of media, certain kinds of

podcasts, certain kinds of YouTube material, or channels that actually decrease perception gaps. And there's other kinds that tend to increase perception gaps. In fact, this is an area where social media companies right now could actually do this kind of surveying and polling and figuring out for different kinds of users over the course of, you know, a month or something like that, based on what we've shown you, are people's perception gaps getting worse, are they getting better? And that's kind of one direction that might we might need to be exploring more.

CH 36:58
Yeah, this is one of the issues I feel most passionate about, frankly, when someone asked me what my politics are, these days, I'm tempted to not answer with any ideology or side. But more to say that what I'm what I'm against fundamentally, is the demonization misunderstanding of the other side, whatever other side means for you. And I remember that getting this point about, about just the misperception on the other side, I think Yascha Mounk had a great article in The Atlantic, maybe a year or two ago about it may have even been the same study. But, you know, the gist of what I remember is that, you know, basically Republicans have a really outsized perception of Democrats, as you know, they're, they're all pro open borders, and half of them are gay, it's, you know, and it's because they're watching and consuming, sources that support that. And then democrats think, you know, all republicans want to shut down the borders and not let a single immigrant in. And it's, it's humbling to recognise just how wrong those perceptions are. But it's also it just gels with my real life experience of meeting people with different politics. And like that I actually don't know that many quote unquote, normal people that aren't sort of hyper online, who have politics that are straight down the line. either side, most people have sort of a bundle of beliefs and instincts that are sort of contradictory and based on their own life experience and whatnot. But there's this sense that the other side is just is so beyond talking to is is just, it turns politics into a power struggle, where the There's no use for persuasion, we're almost two different nations in one and the only question is who wields power?

Tristan Harris 38:46
Yeah. And that's why there's this vicious spiral between the worse our perception gaps over each other, the more hostile we get, the more we come ready to a conversation, the more we come to a conversation, ready to do mind reading and say, Oh, I know where you're going with this belief if you support Trump, and clearly you must support all this sort of white supremacy stuff, or if you support this, and you know, one of the things is that we're so eager to call out what's wrong with the other side instead of looking at our own sides? What are the things about our own side that the other side find so and compelling? And you know, this is a famous Stephen Covey quote, that we judge others by their behaviours, but we judge ourselves by our intentions. And I think that that is a simple asymmetry. That's also part of how our mind processes information that there's almost a unequal way that we represent our intentionality. And we assume that if you're doing the other thing that you have these awful intentions, but we grant ourselves much more liberty or someone that who's on our side. So if, you know if you're on the Biden side, and he does something that you think that that might be distasteful, but you say but I trust his intentions because he's on my side. But when I say you know, someone on the Trump side is the same thing. You say, I don't care if he meant it in some different way, because I don't trust that his intentions were good. And I think social media again, has widened the basis of our perception because you said a thing earlier, which is, we've been watching different movies of reality, which means that we're actually doing confirmation bias on a different background set

of facts. Like, for example, I actually spend a lot of time trying to understand how the media on both sides are missing each other. And what they're trying to point out is hypocrisy or sort of bias or distortion or reporting. And, you know, there's this thing about, you know, did Trump recommended that people drink bleach? People think that he did. I'm not saying that he, that I endorse how President Trump talked about the pandemic and he was, I think, horrible for just about so much of the pandemic. But if you look at the actual transcript, people on the right say, Well, he didn't actually say drink bleach, he questioned it, he referred to the Deborah Burks and sort of asked her this sort of question. And then Clorox and Lysol came out with statements afterwards saying, "No, no, no, please don't drink bleach". In other words, people interpreted the kind of the end result of his communication as he was endorsing drinking bleach, and then people on the right, look at it saying, look, the media wants to sort of make a cartoon of his speech, and say that he said something he didn't say. Now, again, the implication of what he said, is pretty close to basically recommending that people explore drinking bleach, but people look at the way that that was misrepresented. They look at thousands of examples like that. And that's what I'm trying to figure out. What would it take for us to be more humble about what we know. And the problem is, it's exhausting. Because the other sort of secondary problem with social media is it's generating so many examples that we'd have to adjudicate. Like, do we really want to have to go back and look at every single transcript of every single one of these things and say, was the media unfair, in this instance, in this instance, in this instance, in this instance, where the number of instances overall is growing exponentially, because social media rewards a kind of hyper microscopic view of the present where its slices are moment to moment reality into these again, these like smaller and smaller chunks of drama snowballs, in which if we're trying to get to the bottom of something, do we really want to spend time adjudicating every tiny little statement? Or do we would be better off realising that we've collectively been deranged by this process, and that we need to actually kind of hit a reset button, because I don't know another way that whether it's climate change, or some of these other things, we're trying to tackle, that we're actually going to get there unless we realise that we've been distorted in such a big way.

CH 42:14

Yeah, it's, it's really, really concerning. And, you know, another thing I've noticed, through while thinking about this, and watching the documentary was, I think there are a lot of smart people, or people that are simply, you know, fed up with the sort of polarisation and of cable news, especially that that have come to notice and become angry at hypocrisy and bias on both sides. They see Fox News and MSNBC and obviously their folks that are just hook line and sinker on either side. But there's a there's a large number of people that I think view both with some annoyance and frustration at the level of one sidedness and bias. And what I've noticed, though, is that people don't have that same level of anger and frustration with regard to their own newsfeeds. Yeah. Which are which are equally biased. But seem for whatever reason to be mine or tailor to me or somehow more objective or benign. Right. So that that feeling of anger you get from even if you're a pretty even handed person, you don't really get that same sense when you're your Twitter is perfectly curated, to show you not only the things that you agree with most But the worst versions of disagreements, right, the versions of the other side that are likely to anger you most not likely to make you think so it's a very difficult situation to get around. Have you heard of Cass Sunstein at all?

Tristan Harris 43:46

Oh, yeah, I know, I know, Cass and then a big in basis for the informing our work and the behavioural economics lens in general from podcasts. And you know, Daniel Kahneman have been really critical. I just want to add one quick thing to what you're sharing saying, we get upset at bad agents, we don't get upset at systems. So if Don Lemon says something unfair on CNN, that they wouldn't say that they say about one side, they don't say about the other or if Tucker Carlson says something that triggers the left, you know, it's easy to get upset at agents for distorting things. But you know, we can get upset at Exxon for climate change. But it's really hard to get upset at climate change the system. And I think what we have is the source of a social climate change of culture that is hard to get people upset at even though it actually has is responsible for more bias, more distortion, because there's no specific agent that is doing the distorting. I mean, it is there is a Twitter algorithm that is distorting there is a Facebook algorithm. There's a Facebook recommended groups feature that has, you know, pushed people into extremist groups and Q anon and all these other things. But it's harder to get people upset at these invisible systems and these man behind the curtain type, diffuse, you know, derangement processes than it is to get people upset at one person.

CH 44:58
Yeah, I think I mean it While watching that documentary, all of the people that used to work at Google, Facebook and Twitter, saying, Yeah, we build these terrible systems. They're all pretty likeable people. And, you know, even someone who is who is has a little bit of a colder persona or way of presenting himself like Zuckerberg, you know, if he were gone tomorrow, someone would replace him the next day that that is in the same exact incentive structure. Yeah. So yeah, this is a very difficult problem. I think it's, it may also be one that is getting worse in in the context of a lockdown. Because people just have so much more time to consume, you know, screen material and not interact with others, people have a good reason to not interact with others. And it's very easy to lose touch to go down conspiracy rabbit holes, when you're stuck inside all day. Yeah, I've noticed this with some people. What have you noticed? Well, I've just there. You know, I have one friend who I recently talked to who has just totally gone down the rabbit hole on crazy conspiracies, right. And this is a smart guy, who, you know, the latest one he was talking to me about was that big pharma is trying to turn people gay using SSRIs. Right? I don't know how, but he knows a lot about it. And there's a lot to know, there's a lot of dots to connect. And if it were a movie, I can't see how it'd be a very interesting film. But it's psycho. And, and, you know, I have to think I have another friend as well, who's just an extremely social person that makes sense of his life through socialising largely, and now is just stuck at home with his parents and is not doing well is just becoming paranoid about friendships he had never before become paranoid about. And I have to think that this kind of thing is going on all over the country, perhaps all over the world. I do want to touch a little bit on the mental health aspect of this a little bit more. I remember reading Jean Twenge, I believe you pronounce her name, Jean Twenge's book IGen a few years ago, and being really, really just bowled over by some of the things that she was saying in that book, the trend of people sort of born right when I was born 96 and later, and especially girls suffering horrible declines in mental health, likely as a result of social media, you know, increased suicide rate, increase admissions, to hospitals for self harm. So can you talk a little bit about that? And how you see that playing out right now?

Tristan Harris 47:56

Yeah. So this is yet another one of the harms that was talked about in The Social Dilemmas, obviously, to teenage mental health. But really, it's just the same thing that we all experienced as teenagers are more affected by some of the dynamics that actually, when I was first doing this work, and was reading Michael Moss's, Salt, Sugar Fat book, which we talked about earlier, it mirrors what was said there, which is that you know, all human social primates respond to glucose and sugar, right? Like we are all attracted to it. But if you look at kids, actually, the sort of dose response of how much they go for it is just much, much, much higher. So if you look at, for example, negativity bias, right, so our minds are especially tuned to pay attention to negative information about us over positive information, because it's more evolutionarily important for our survival and fitness. So the example there is if you post something on Instagram, and you got 100 comments, and 99 of the comments are positive, but one of the comments is negative. If your brain was a neutral, attention seeking machine, it would just do a weighted analysis that says, Okay, I've got 99 positive comments, I should probably take those in. I've got one tiny little negative comment, instead, is that the proportion of attention that our minds deliver us? No, obviously...you know, and are we as you know, adults, you, Coleman and I unique in our experience, or do you think this is basically common and universal? It's universal. And our children, though even more vulnerable to this sort of negativity bias, like, absolutely. So this is just one of those things. That's true. But all of us are social validation, I mean, the number of likes, so if you post something, you post this podcast, and maybe you're excited about when this podcast goes out. And you do a little extra tweet thread about it or something. You know, 10 minutes later, and you go back and see Do I have, you know, any likes on it? Did people say anything interesting on it. We're all vulnerable to checking what other people say and think about us, again, but teenagers are even more vulnerable to that. I think when it comes to some of the really dark trends that are talked about in the film around self harm, high depressive symptoms for especially 13 to 17 year old. I believe that teenage girls, mainly although boys have their own issues, you know, I there's a lot of different factors. I think there's still...the research between Jean Twenge and Jonathan Haidt who I'd recommend people's check out his work and coddling of the American mind delves more into it. I just think from a design feature, the idea that people are rewarded for a life that they're not actually living, that you get more likes, you get more comments, when you do a filter on your photo, that is enhancing your appearance in ways that is not, you get you know, you get less likes and comments when you are not enhancing your photos and enhancing your own beauty. Again, is this any different from makeup? Or is this any different from advertising to teenage girls about appearance or things like that, but we're subjecting especially young girls to emphasise their image to other people online. From a very early age. If you look at things like Snapchat, that they have these beautification filters, where you know, you hit a button, and it pumps up your lips and your cheeks and your makes your eyeballs just slightly bigger. And it just does these subtle things that are basically just like instant Botox in the form of a digital AI filter. And they get way more comments and feedback when they are that way. And again, it's sort of subconsciously a message that people will like you when you look different, or you are different than who you actually are. And that is setting up kind of an identity bargain that is unsustainable. For I think, the very vulnerable developmental period of who we are when we're figuring out who we are. That's another thing I think that's also subtle about social media is, as young people, if you had Piaget, or people who studied child psychology, they would tell you that it's important that we're able to try on different identities, when we're young, we should be able to try on being a golfer to be able to try out being a hip hop person, we should be able to try on being formal and unfit, informal and a goth, or whatever it is. And we don't really get that chance, because we're basically made, we're judged

constantly by how we showed up. And the more you experiment, the more you're going to be sort of beaten up by the group. And so again, this kind of constant panopticon of surveillance for how we look like what we say what we do, and again, have a moment of drama, you know, become a snowball that then takes over the classroom, because one of the other things that we do at the Centre for Humane Technology is talk to schools and educators. And, you know, we talk to these, these high school teachers who will say, we have to spend, you know, the first two hours of Monday morning, dealing with all the drama that occurred over the weekend on social media, because someone made some comments in someone else's photo, and then that made someone else upset. And then of course, because instead of that being a private interaction, it was a public interaction that then 300 people in the school or the class saw that again, turns into this snowball, but then has to get, you know, classroom time to kind of clear up. So this is the kind of, I think, psychological Warzone that we have taken kids and put them into and all you have to look at is that most people who are executives at the tech companies of the social media companies do not let or encourage their own teenage daughters and sons to use these products. That's usually all you need to know. And to take another line from the book salt, sugar fat, the CEO of Lunchables, foods, which was a billion dollar a year food product line did not let his own kids eat Lunchables. You know, the ethics of do unto others as you would do to yourself or your own children is easily violated here. And that usually is all you need to know.

CH 53:06
Yeah, yeah. And to go back to the original story. When my mother left the M&M Mars marketing company, there was not a single piece of candy in my house growing up that much, you could say, Yeah, okay. Well, I want to just end by talking a little about what you're doing at the Centre for Humane Technology and pointing people in the direction of your work. Do you guys have a podcast now? Right?

Tristan Harris 53:30
Yeah. So you know, the Centre for Humane Technology is a nonprofit that I and several sort of former technology insiders found it to be a vehicle for changing the systems. A lot of what we've been doing over the last year has been shepherding the release of the film, because that's been such a huge aspect of the work. I think, changing culture and changing how people understand these issues. I'd really recommend people check out the social time obviously, and see the film. But to go deeper, we have a podcast called your undivided attention where we interview various experts on human nature disinformation, hypnosis, magic, psychology of slot machines, to really just look at how is technology influencing our lower level psychology because the word humane, where it comes from is my co founder. He's a Raskin. His father was Jef Raskin, who actually started the Macintosh project at Apple in something like 1980. And he wrote a book called The Human Interface. and in it he wrote that technology is humane, if it is responsive to human needs, and consider it of human frailties. And I think the thing that we've gotten wrong about technology up until now, is we've either been negligent or paved over or sort of ignorant of human frailties. Or we've actively exploited human frailties when it comes to the design of technology. And both of those cases have led to the kind of most toxic cultural effects of technology that I think we're seeing today from misinformation, which is essentially tricking our minds heuristics to evaluate what's true or what's relevant to what was in context. misinformation isn't just the pope endorsed Donald Trump, it's things like, you know, during the election, I was called into a TV station to talk about there was this fake news story going around about these ballots that were getting stuffed into this box and someone thought some election manipulation was happening. It turned

out that this video of ballots getting stuffed into this box was actually a big one of those big black camera boxes, like video camera boxes, and someone stuffing something totally different into this box. And it was getting relabeled as this ballot stuffing operation. And so, you know, again, what does that tricking, it's tricking our minds shortcuts for making sense of the world because, you know, you have probably your friends who are at home, you know, looking at the conspiracy theories and pulling out articles from two years ago, or three years ago, as if they had just happened today, because oftentimes, we don't look at the data when something was shared. So it's not false information. But it's false context. It's a warping of what that thing would mean. And then again, sequencing and cherry picking facts. So if you have one article about you know, the CIA doing experiments with psychedelics on people in MK Ultra, followed by something that looks kind of related now, even though the thing that's related now is completely bullshit, you can actually sort of cherry pick a set of things that might legitimise the thing that people are talking about now, by finding a couple legitimate pieces from history. So this is where it gets incredibly confusing. And Adam Curtis, the documentary filmmaker I mentioned earlier who did The Century of the Self, has a new, really great documentary out called Can't Get You Out Of My Head. And he talks about this confusion of some of these fake conspiracy theories about the Illuminati, that were spread deliberately as sort of a joke or a kind of manipulation that then actually sort of had a life of their own and became, you know, legitimised, you know, the Russia actually planted I don't know if you noticed, but Russia planted the original conspiracy that the AIDS virus was cooked up in a government lab at Fort Dietrich, and was actually deliberately created to kill you know, gay people. And that I think, today, there's still some large percentage of people who believe that even though it was planted in an Indian newspaper, Russia planted this in an Indian newspaper, and it caught on like wildfire because it just sounded that just so like one of these just so stories. So I think across the board for each one of these cases, fake news, distraction, addiction, teenage mental health issues, polarisation derangement of misperceiving, our other political opponents, what do all those things have in common? It comes back to Jeff Raskin's, quote, "Technology is humane, if it is responsive to human needs, and consider it if human frailties", and I think the project of making technology actually humane is actually almost sort of this whole new renaissance of technology that is considerate of human frailties, that puts human bugs and human frailties at the center of what we might be, you know, again, through either ignorance or through explicit manipulation, tweaking. So I could give a few examples of that if you want, but you can go in any direction you want.

CH 57:45
Yeah, yeah. Give me some examples.

Tristan Harris 57:47
Yeah. So I mean, let me think of one here. You know, it's funny, when we think about humane technology, I often actually go back to some of the wisdom traditions, because usually, there's, you know, the wisdom traditions are often identifying some fact about human nature. And then, you know, which is some primal fact about ourselves that we have to not necessarily overcome, but live in healthy balance with so example is the Serenity Prayer, what is it God give me the wisdom to, you know, accept the things that I can't change, to change the things that I can and have the wisdom to tell the difference. If you think about that Serenity Prayer, it's almost a humane technology in the sense that if you think about our attention, back, you know, 200,000 years ago in the savanna, everything that you could put your attention on, you also had agency over. So there you are, you know, somewhere, you

know, in the Palaeolithic Era. And you see that rock where you see that line where you can run away from the line when you see it. So you have agency over the thing you're putting your attention on, if you see that rock, you can put your hands on it, you can take it and you can throw it and you can kill the fish or something. So our attention was coupled with what we had agency over. As we moved into modernity, our attention became decoupled with what we have agency of increasingly, the things that we're putting attention on, are not things that we have some kind of physical ability to manipulate or change. And social media is the most extreme version of that decoupling, because you're constantly presented with things that make you angry, that are far beyond your control or way out there. Or even when you are, quote, unquote, optimistically, giving people true information about climate change, or racial injustice, or something that really matters to you. Oftentimes, it's done so in a way that produces learned helplessness. And imagine if technology today is inhumane because it's blind to this, the fact that our minds are not able to discern what we have agency over and what we don't humane technology would be aware of what we have agency over and help us like the Serenity Prayer put our attention on the things that we can actually change. And if you imagine if on a daily basis, just think about the percentage of your day that you're using technology. And you know, instead of most of your attention going to things that you have no agency over. And then on those you know, if you just think about the zooming out and the treadmill of all those days adding up in a week passes by in a month passes by and nothing really changed. Like none of the issues you really care about changed your own life didn't change your relationships and change because you were constantly paying attention to things that you couldn't do anything about. Whereas imagine a different kind of technology where, in this subtle way, and I'm not going to paint out exactly how it works, but the insight and the principle is technology that helped us focus our attention on the things that we actually had agency over. So on a weekly basis, you started seeing things in your life get better, you started seeing things in the world that you were trying to change, whether it's passing a climate policy in your local city or town district, and any of these things that are that are local, that are high agency, you know, going to a bank and switching to a credit union from a major bank, which is actually one of the best ways of fighting climate change is getting more people to switch to credit unions. There's all these subtle things that we can actually do that are more systemically organised, that actually have impact systemically. But technology's not steering us in those directions. And to take the work of Cass Sunstein who mentioned earlier does work on behavioural economics. You know, one of our lines is that we're only as good as the menus that are put in front of us. And technology is sort of the menu of choices that we're given on a daily basis of what to think about what to do, who to get back to, those are all framed by user interface decisions that someone at Apple made about when they made email work the way they did, or text messaging work the way they did, or someone at Facebook about when they made newsfeed work the way they did, the menus that are increasingly put in front of us are not helping us your attention on the things that we care about where that we can make a difference on and a humane attention economy in a humane digital environment would be one that is about acknowledging this fact about human nature, and then designing actively to support it. So there's all sorts of other examples. But that's, I think, the flavour of what the sort of humane Renaissance that needs to take place would be really understanding where technology has to range and exploited and been ignorant or negligent of these human weaknesses.

CH 1:01:43

Yeah, well, on that note, it's been great to talk to you Tristan, I think what you're doing is amazing, and I think a lot of people are seeing in their own lives, especially because of quarantine. How the the whole machinery of social media and, and the way that we're interacting with screens, is harmful, both psychologically and to our entire political culture, and to our future as a country. So I just direct people to your podcast and Centre for Humane Technology. That's what it's called.

Tristan Harris 1:02:18
Yeah, Centre for Humane Technology, humanetech.com. And just to give one more example, I'm calling because it's related to your work. Yeah, I really do mean this sincerely. I'm not trying to trying to flatter you. But I think what you're trying to do is add complexity and nuance to topics that are framed in very black and white ways or framed in simplistic ways that are not accurate to the underlying thing. You know, you hear constantly on social media about these sort of totalizing frames, we need to reopen the economy. And we should just forget about COVID. Or we need to care about frontline health care workers and COVID. And then, if you That means you don't care about reopening the economy, and I don't know if you saw this meme that went around earlier. So this has been diagram of people taking COVID seriously, people worried about the expansion of authoritarian government policies, people acknowledging that this pandemic is highlighting deep seated structural racism and injustice. And people very concerned about impending economic devastation, the survival of businesses. And the point is you can be here in that center point that's caring about all of them. And I think that too often, especially when you have only 140 characters to express your opinion, one of the other problems that is inhumane about technology is that our we're being forced into these smaller frames that don't accommodate these nuanced perspectives that is taken into account, we can be concerned about these structural problems. And we can be concerned about these one off events that happen, whether it's George Floyd or whatever the examples that you cover so many on your on your podcast, there's a way that we can hold both perspectives. And I just think that that's part of what we really need, because technologies that that is not aware of context collapse. And this sort of all or nothing thinking or simplistic framing is technology. That's reifying. The problem that I think you're trying to address on your podcast, and I just wanted to mention that it's yet another example that our brains are getting wrong.

CH 1:03:57
Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I remember, actually the first one or two weeks of the COVID pandemic, or when, when we really became aware of it outside of China, like mid March or so. I remember noticing how strange and amazing and refreshing it was, that I didn't feel like that the topic had yet become politicised. There was right. I don't know if people remember this. But there was a good one or two weeks where I would read or watch TV. And I was trying to figure out what we were all trying to figure out what was the fatality rate, who is it affecting. And there was no sense that the right or the left had different priorities or different values on this. And it was just like, imagine if we treated climate change this way, if it was just like a problem to be solved by the best minds, and we all you know, we have our tribal instincts including me, including you, including everyone, but we recognise that this is just not getting us anywhere where it's going. And then of course, a week or two when it became one is the party of mass. One is a party of not wearing masks. And exactly the whole machinery of political bias got imported. And now I'm reading sources and trying to read through the lines of what I'm reading. And suspicious of sources I maybe shouldn't be suspicious of right, just the whole machinery of neurosis

that comes with knowing or on a politicised topic. So, to the extent that we can use technology to to avoid that, to prolong the period on which a topic can be apolitical or to God forbid to reverse the the politicisation that's happened around certain topics can only be to the good.

Tristan Harris 1:05:38

I feel like we need a culture that recognises when we're doing epistemology, we're trying to figure out what's true, versus when we are starting with tribalism. And I think we need a social norm. That is, if there's any place to be have some kind of call out culture, it should be calling out tribal based ways of understanding reality. I have to admit, when I saw Tucker Carlson talk about the what was it, the Texas energy shutdown, and, you know, all these people that had to have his crazy, you know, cold front, that's just killing me to kill people in Texas. And instead of talking about the uniqueness of this sort of one and 100 years weather events, and how that's connected to some of the other climate forces that are happening, he talked about it in terms of this is why we shouldn't have green energy, because it was the windmills that shut down, which was later sort of, as I understand it, and people should double check this, but my understanding is that that was sort of debunked, it wasn't because of the windmills the green energy was because of something else, not properly. I don't really remember actually. But it just struck me that this is an example where the perception the way that we this is an example of seeing two different movies of reality of the same event where I saw that what happened and said, this is an example of the impending climate catastrophe, which is going to generate so much more uncertain weather, that we're going to need to take much more radical action, and seeing how that even when faced with the exact same movie, the exact same set of events, the exact same physical reality, our attention selects for very different information that says, actually, we should be upset at the green energy that led to this collapse of our energy system, instead of saying, This is why climate change is such an important issue, and we should do so much more on it. So I think I don't know how to do this is I think the challenge of our lifetimes is just how do we unfeigned culture from this politicised frame so that whether I wear a mask or not, it's not a symbol of what tribe? I'm on whether I put an American flag in my Twitter bio does not say what political party I associate with whether I talk about, you know, fast questions about vaccine safety that might be legitimate about the differences between mRNA vaccines versus the old style, you know, method of generating vaccines doesn't say what political party you're on. Whether you ask questions about the origins of the virus can be a genuine epidemic process, not a tribalist process where it assumes that you're a Trump supporter, whether you say that, you know, you talk about Russian influence on social media, doesn't mean you're a democrat trying to say that Hillary Clinton would should have won the election. These are all examples of where people are painting each other as having a tribalist motivation, when we really should be able to genuinely engage in different topics with good faith and actually try to get to the bottom of it. The question is, what is it that culture that we can be part of that says, Yeah, that's the game I want to be playing. I don't want to be playing these other games. But somehow that's got to happen.

CH 1:08:15

Yeah, absolutely. So that's what I'm trying to do. But it's very tough. There's an inertia to the force of tribalism. It's just, you know, it doesn't appeal to as many people as much of the time to engage in that way, it's less entertaining, it doesn't get your limbic system, as involved quite as much. There's a constant uphill battle on that front.

Tristan Harris 1:08:37

Totally. You know, it's and it's funny, I know, you had a Chloe Valerie on your podcast, and one of the practices...Yeah, she's great. I'd love to meet her at some point, actually. But she, you know, she, I think has this practice of really expressing gratitude for people's opinions that she disagrees with. I think she gave some really nice positive comments to Ibram Kendi, who I know she disagrees with his approach on anti racism or things like that. And I think Imagine if you opened up social media, you actually appreciated three people. And before you could even like, you know, it's almost like the opening hours of a store. You know, like before you could get into the store of this public this global public conversation. You could appreciate people who you might disagree with and select those people and then say something, and what kind of positive spirit that might engender that if you saw a feed of people appreciating each other. That's how you can get some use out of this sort of ego death spiral where people feel like they're under attack is that the only thing they can do to start off engaging in Twitter is to start by villainizing. The other side as opposed to get the other cycle going, where we're starting by appreciation, starting with gratitude, not just trying to say this in some kind of mumbo jumbo, New Age way. But I think there is a different process. It's why gratitude. If you just do five minutes of gratitude in the morning, it actually is a really big state change in your nervous system. Of course, doing that on your own is very different than if that's what these technology platforms invited us to do. But that could be a really beautiful world as if we were invited by our tech To be appreciating other people, there's a really very vastly different landscape of how everything from calendars and, you know, text messaging and social media could work if it was really putting primacy on what elevates more of our wisdom and our compassion for each other than what you know helps us tear each other down.

CH 1:10:17

Absolutely. On that note, it's been great Tristan. Thank you so much for coming on my show.

Tristan Harris 1:10:22

Thanks, Coleman. Great to great to talk to you