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So if you can't afford a subscription, there's an option. And Sam Harris dug to request a free account. And we grant 100 percent of those requests. No questions asked. Welcome to the Making Sense podcast, this is Sam Harris. OK, very brief housekeeping today. Just a couple of announcements, first, I will be doing another Zoom call for subscribers, and that will be on October 7th. I'm not sure if that's going to be an open ended Q&A or whether the questions will be focused on a theme.

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I'll decide that in the next few days. But anyway, the last one was fun and hopefully the fun will continue. So I will see you on October 7th and you should be on my mailing list if you want those details. Also, there's a few exciting changes happening over on the waking up side of things. So pay attention over there if you're an app user. And I think that's it. Well, today, I'm speaking with Tristan Harris, Tristan has been on the podcast before.

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And he is one of the central figures in a new documentary. Which is available on Netflix now. And that film is the social dilemma, which discusses the growing problem of social media and the fracturing of society, which is our theme today. So as you'll hear, I highly recommend that you watch this film, but I think you'll also get a lot from this conversation. I mean, if you're looking out at the world and wondering why things seem so crazy out there, social media is very likely the reason or is the reason that is aggregating so many other reasons.

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It's the reason why we can't converge on a shared understanding of what's happening so much of the time. We can't agree about whether specific events attest to an epidemic of racism in our society or whether these events are caused by some other derangement in our thinking or just bad incentives or bad luck. We can't agree about what's actually happening. And amazingly, we're about to hold a presidential election that. It seems. Our democracy might not even survive, really, it seems valid to worry whether we might be tipped into chaos by merely holding a presidential election.

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It's fairly amazing that we are in this spot and social media is largely the reason. It's not entirely the reason a lot of this falls on Trump, some of it falls on the far left. But the fact that we can't stay sane as a society right now, that. It's largely due to the fact that we are simply drowning in misinformation. Anyway, that is the topic of today's conversation, and I was very happy to get Tristan back on the podcast.

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Apologies for the uneven sound pre covid we were bringing everyone into studios where they could be professionally recorded. Now we're shipping people the zoom devices and microphones, but occasionally the technology fails and we have to rely on the Skype signal. So what you're hearing today is Skype is actually pretty good for Skype, but apologies if any of the audio sounds subpar. And now I bring you Tristan Harris. I am here with Tristan Harris. Tristan, it's great to get you back on the podcast.

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It's really good to be back, Sam. It's been a while since the first time I was on here. Yeah, we will cover similar ground, but a lot has happened since we last spoke. And it's to my eye everything has gotten worse so that there's there is more damage to analyze and try to prevent in the future. But before we

jump in, remind people who you are and how you come at these things. What's your brief bio for this relevant to this conversation?

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Yeah, well, just to say briefly, I guess one of the reasons why we're talking now and most relevant to my recent biography is the new Netflix documentary that just came out called The Social Dilemma, in which all these technology insiders are speaking about the Frankenstein that they've created. We'll get into that later. Prior to that, I was a Google design ethicist coming in through an acquisition of a technology company that I started called Absher that Google acquired and after being at the company for a little while, migrated into a role of thinking about how do you ethically steer two billion people's attention when you hold the collective human psyche in your in your hands.

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And then prior to that, as was also discussed in the film, is I was at Stanford who studied computer science, human computer interaction, but specifically at a lab called the Persuasive Technology Lab, which I'm sure we'll get into, which relates to just sort of a life long view of how is the human mind vulnerable to psychological influence and have had a fascination with those topics, from cults to sleight of hand, magic and mentalism and heroes like Derren Brown, who's a mutual friend of ours, and how that plays into the things that we're seeing with technology.

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Yes, I would just want to reiterate that this film, The Social Dilemma, is on Netflix now. And yeah, that's the proximate cause of this conversation. And it really is. It's great. It really covers the issue in a compelling way. So I highly recommend people go see that and they don't have to go anywhere. Obviously just open Netflix and there's no irony there. I would count Netflix as I'm sure they're an offender in some way, but they're I mean, their business model really is distinct from much of what we're going to talk about.

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I mean, they just they could have made the choice to they're clearly gaming people's attention because they're they want to cancel churn and they want people on the platform and deriving as much value from the platform as possible. But there is something different going on over there with respect to not not being part of the ad economy and the attention economy in quite the same way. That's a distinction we could draw later on. But is there a bright line between proper subscription services like that and what we're going to talk about?

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Yeah, I mean, I think the core question we're here to talk about is in what in which ways and where our technologies, incentives aligned with the public good. And I think the problem that brings us here today is where technology's incentives are misaligned with the public good through the business model of advertising and through models like user generated content. Clearly, because we live in a finite attention economy where there's only so much human attention, we are managing a commons, a collective environment.

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And because Netflix, like any other actor, including politicians, including conferences, including you or you or I, or this podcast or my podcast, we're all competing for the same finite resource. And so there's a difference, I think, in how different business models engage in an attention economy, but a business model in which the cost of producing things that are going to reach exponential numbers of people. Exponential broadcast in the case of Netflix, but also in the case of these other companies, there's a difference when there is a sense of ethics or responsibility or privacy or child controls that we add into that equation.

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And I'm sure we'll get more into those topics.

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Right. OK, so let's take it from the top here. What's wrong with social media at this point? If you could boil it down to the the elevator pitch answer, what is the problem that we're going to spool over the next hour or so?

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Well, it's funny because the film actually opens with that prompt, the blank stares of any technology insiders, including myself, because I think it's so hard to define exactly what this problem is. There's clearly a problem of incentives, but beneath that, there's a problem of what those incentives are doing and where the exact harms show up and the way that we frame it in the film. And in a big presentation we gave at the S.F. Jazz Center back in April twenty nineteen to a bunch of the top technologists and people in the industry was to say that while we've all been looking out for the moment when I would overwhelm human strengths and when we would get the singularity, when would I take our jobs, we want to be smarter than humans.

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We missed this much, much earlier point when technology didn't overwhelm human strengths, but it undermined human weaknesses. And you can actually frame the cacophony of grievances and scandals and problems that we've seen in the tech industry, from distraction to addiction to polarization to. Bullying to harassment, to the breakdown of truth, all in terms of progressively hacking more and more of human vulnerabilities and weaknesses. So if we take it from the top, you know, our brains Short-Term memory system have seven plus or minus two things that we can hold when technology starts to overwhelm our short term and working memory.

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We feel that as a problem called distraction. Oh my gosh, I can't remember what I was doing. I came here to open an email. I came here to go to Facebook to look something up, and now I got sucked down into something else. That's a problem of overwhelming the human limit. And we can sort of just start our working memory when it overwhelms our dopamine systems and our reward systems that we feel that is a problem called addiction when it taps into and exploits our reliance on stopping cues that at some point I will stop talking.

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And that's a cue for you to keep going when technology doesn't stop talking and it just gives you the infinite, bottomless bowl. We feel that is a problem called addiction or addictive use. When technology exploits our social approval and giving us more and more social approval, we feel that as a problem called teen depression, because suddenly children are dosed with social approval every few minutes and are hungry for more likes and comparing themselves in terms of the currency of likes.

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And when technology hacks the limits of our heuristics for determining what is true, for example, that that Twitter profile who just commented on your tweet five seconds ago, that photo looked pretty real. They've got a bio that seems pretty real. They've got ten thousand followers. We only have a few cues that we can use to discern what is real and bots and deep fakes. And I'm sure we'll get into three actually overwhelmed that human weakness. So we don't even know what's true.

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So I think the main thing that we really want people to get is through a series of misaligned incentives which will further get into technology, has overwhelmed and undermined human weaknesses. And many of the problems that we're seeing as separate are actually the same. And just one more thing on this analogy. It's kind of like collectively this digital fallout of addiction, teen depression, suicides, polarization, breakdown of truth. We think of this as a collective digital fallout or a kind of climate change of culture that much like the oil extractive economy that we have been living in an extractive race for attention.

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There's only so much when it starts running out. We have to start fracking your attention by putting

your attention into multiple streams. I want you watching an iPad and a phone and the television at the same time, because that lets me triple the size of the attention economy. But that extractive race for attention creates this global climate change of culture. And much like climate change, it happens slowly, it happens gradually, it happens chronically. It's not this sudden, immediate threat.

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It's this slow erosion of the social fabric and that collectively we called in that presentation human downgrading, but you can call it whatever you want. The point is that if you think back to the climate change movement before there was climate change as a as a cohesive understanding of emissions and linking to climate change, we had some people working on polar bears and people working on the coral reefs. We have some people working on species lost in the Amazon. And it wasn't until we had an encompassing view of how all these problems get worse.

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That's that we start to get change. And so we're really hoping that this film can act as a kind of catalyst for a global response to this really destructive thing that's happened to society.

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OK, so let me play devil's advocate for a moment using some of the elements you've already put into play, because if you are going to impressively agree throughout this conversation on the nature of the problem, but I'm channeling a skeptic. Here and it's actually not that hard for me to empathize with a skeptic, because, as you point out, it really takes a fair amount of work to pry the scales from people's eyes on this point. And the nature of the problem, though, it really is everywhere to be seen.

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It's surprisingly elusive. Right? So if you reference something like, you know, a spike in teen depression and self-harm and suicide, you know, there's no one who's going to pretend not to care about that. And then there really is just the question of, you know, what's the causality here? And is it really a matter of exposure to social media that is driving it? And I think I don't think people are especially skeptical of that. And that's that's a discrete problem that I think most people would easily understand and be concerned about.

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But the more general problem for all of us is is harder to keep in view. And so when you talk about things again, these are things you've already conceded in a way. So attention has been a finite resource always. And everyone has always been competing for it. So if you're going to publish a book, you are part of this race for people's attention. If you if you were going to release something on the radio or television, it was always a matter of trying to grab people's attention.

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And as you say, we're trying to do it right now with this podcast. So it's when considered through that lens, it's hard to see what is fundamentally new here. Right. So, yes, this is zero sum. And then the question is, is it good content or not? I think people want to say, right. It's just this is just a matter of interfacing in some way with human desire and human curiosity. And you're either doing that successfully or not.

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And what's so bad about really succeeding, you know, just fundamentally succeeding in a way that. Yeah, I mean, you can call it addiction, but really it's just what people find captivating is what people want to do. They want they want to grant their attention to the next video. That is absolutely enthralling. But how is that different from, you know, leafing through the pages of a hard copy of Vanity Fair in the year 1987 and feeling that you really want to read the next article rather than work or do whatever else you thought you were going to do with your afternoon.

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So there's that. And then there's the sense that the fact that advertising is involved and really, really the foundation of everything. We're going to talk about what's so bad about that. And so really, it's a

story of ads just getting better. You know, I don't have to see ads for Tampax anymore, right? I mean, I go online and I see ads for things that I probably want or nearly want because I abandoned them in my Zappos shopping cart.

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So what what's wrong with that? And I think most people are stuck in that place. Like, they just we have to do a lot of work to bring them into the place of the conversation where the emergency becomes salient. And so let's start there.

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Gosh, there's so much good stuff to unpack here. So on the attention economy, obviously we've always had it. We've had television competing for attention radio and we've had evolutions of the attention economy before, a competition between books, competition between newspapers, competition between television to more engaging television to more channels of television. So in many ways this isn't new. But I think what we really need to look at is what was mediating where that attention went to mediating the big word smartphones.

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We check out we check our smartphones a hundred times or something like that per day. They are intimately woven into the fabric of our daily lives and ever more so because of if we establish addiction or just this addictive checking that we have that any moment of anxiety, we turn to our phone to look at it. So it's intimately woven into where the attention starting place will come from. It's also taken over our fundamental infrastructure for our basic verbs, like if I want to talk to you or talk to someone else, my phone has become the primary vehicle for just about for many, many verbs in my life, whether it's ordering food or speaking to someone or figuring out what I wear to go on a map.

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We are increasingly reliant on this central node of our smartphone, to be a router for where all of our attention goes. So that's the first part of this intimately woven nature and the fact that it's our social it's part of the social infrastructure by which we rely on we can't avoid it. Part of what makes technology today inhumane is that we're reliant on infrastructure that's not safe or contaminated for many reasons that we'll get into later. A second reason that's different is the degree of asymmetry between, let's say, that newspaper editor or a journalist who is writing that enticing article to get you to turn to the next page versus the level of asymmetry of when you watch a YouTube video and you think, yeah, this time I'm just going to watch one video and then I got to go back to work and you wake up from a trance two hours later and you say, man, what happened to me?

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I should have. More self-control, what that misses is there's literally the Googles, billions of dollars of supercomputing infrastructure on the other side of that slab of glass in your hand pointed at your brain doing predictive analytics on what would be the perfect next video to keep you here.

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And the same is true on Facebook. You think, OK, I've sort of been scrolling through this thing for a while, but I'm just going to swipe up one more time and then I'm done. Each time you swipe up with your finger, you know, you're activating a Twitter or a Facebook or a tick tock supercomputer that's doing predictive analytics, which has billions of data points on exactly the thing that'll keep you here. And I think it's important to expand this metaphor in a way that you've talked about on this in your show before about just the power, increasing power and computational power of of A.I. When you think about a supercomputer pointed at your brain trying to figure out what's the perfect, next thing to show you that's on one side of the screen.

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On the other side of the screen is my prefrontal cortex, which is evolved millions of years ago and doing the best job it can to do goal articulation, goal retention and memory and sort of staying on task, self discipline, et cetera. So who's going to win in that battle? Well, a good metaphor for this is, let's say you or I were to play Garry Kasparov at chess. Like, why would you or I lose? It's because

there I am on the chess board and I'm thinking, OK, if I do this, he'll do this.

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But if I do this, he'll do this. And I'm playing out a few new moves ahead on the chess board. But when Gary looks at that same chess board, he's playing out a million more moves ahead than I can. Right. And that's why Gary is going to win and beat you and I every single time. But when Gary, the human, is playing chess against the best supercomputer in the world, no matter how many million moves ahead that Gary can see, the supercomputer can see billions of moves ahead.

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And when he beats Gary, who is the best human chess player of all time, he's beaten like the human brain at chess because that was kind of the best one that we had. And so when you look at the degree of asymmetry that we now have, when you're sitting there innocuously saying, OK, I'm just going to watch one video and then I'm out, we have to recognize that we have an exponential degree of asymmetry and they know us and our weaknesses better than we know ourselves, to borrow also from a mutual friend, Yuval Harari.

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So I guess I still think the nature of the problem will seem debatable even at this point. So, OK, because, again, you're talking about successfully game in attention, making, you know, various forms of content more captivating, you know, stickier. You know, people are losing time, perhaps, that they didn't know they were going to give over to their devices, but they were doing that with their televisions anyway. I mean, that these statistics, long before we had smartphones, the statistics on watching television were appalling.

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And I forget what they were. There's something like, you know, the average television was on seven hours a day in the home, you know, so that the picture was of people in a kind of Alvis Huxley like, you know, dystopia just plugged in to the boob tube and being fed, you know, bad commercials and and therefore being monetized in some way. That strikes people as not fundamentally different from what's happening now. I mean, yes, it was there was less to choose from.

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You know, there were within two or three different types of laundry detergent. And it was not a matter of a really fine grained manipulation of people's behavior. But it was still, if you wanted, from the perspective of what seems optimal, it's still had a character of propagandizing people, you know, with certain messages that seem less than optimal. You could I'm sure you could talk about teams or just people in general having, you know, body dysmorphia around ideal presentations of human beauty that were, you know, unrealistic, you know, whether Photoshop was involved at that point or not.

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I mean, it was just good lighting and good makeup and and, you know, selection effects that make it make people feel obliged to aspire to irrational standards of beauty. All of these problems that we tend to reference in a conversation like this seemed present. I think the. The thing that strikes me as fundamentally new and this is brought out in your in the film by several people, relates to the issue of misinformation and the silencing of information. So which really does strike me as genuinely new.

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So and there are few analogies here that I find, especially arrestment. What the one thing that Jaron Lanier said, he says in the film and he said on this podcast a year or so ago, which is I think frames it really well, is that just imagine if Wikipedia would present you with information in a way that was completely dependent on your search history or all the data on you that had been collected that showing your biases and your preferences in the way the ways in which your attention can be gamed so that when each of us went to Wikipedia, not only was there no guarantee that we'd be seen precisely the same facts, rather that was a guarantee that we wouldn't be right, that we're in this sort of this shattered epistemology now.

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And we've built this machine into the very machinery we're using to deliver information. Really, the only what is almost the only source of information for most people now is a machine that is designed to partially inform people, misinform people, spread conspiracy theories and lies faster than facts, spread outrage faster than disinterested, nuanced analysis of stories. So it's like we have designed an apparatus whose purpose is to fragment our worldview and to make it possible for us to fuse our cognitive horizon so that if you and I start out in a different place, we can never converge in the middle of the psychological experiment.

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And that that's the thing that it strikes me for which there is no analogue in, you know, all previous moments of culture.

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Yeah, that's one hundred percent. Right. And I mean, if we jump to the chase about what is most concerning, it is the breakdown of a shared reality and the breakdown, therefore, of our capacity to have conversations. And you said it, that if we don't have conversation, we have violence. And when you shatter the epistemic basis of how do we know what we know? And I've been living literally in a different reality, a different Truman Show, as Roger McNamee would say for the last 10 years.

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And we have to keep in mind, we're about 10 years into this radicalization polarization process where each of us have been fed, you know, really a more extreme view of reality for quite a long time that what I really want people to do isn't just to say there's technology addictive or these small questions. It's really to rewind the tape and to ask, you know, how has my mind been fundamentally warped? And so just to go back to the point you made a second ago, you know, so what YouTube is is giving us information.

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Well, first, on that chess match I mentioned of are we going to win or are they going to win 70 percent of the billion hours a day that people spend on YouTube is actually driven by the recommendation system, by with the recommendation system is choosing for us. Just imagine a TV channel where you're not choosing 70 percent of the time. Then the question becomes, as you said, well, what is the default programming of that channel? Is it Walter Cronkite and some kind of semi reliable communal sensemaking, as our friend Eric would say?

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Or is it actually giving us more and more extreme views of reality? So three examples of this. Several years ago, if you were a teenager and looked at a diet video and YouTube, all the several of the videos and the right hand side would be thin. So anorexia videos, because those things were better at keeping people's attention. If you looked at the 9/11 videos, it would look at it would give you Alex Jones Infowars, 9/11 conspiracy theories.

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YouTube recommended Alex Jones conspiracy theories 15 billion times in the right hand side bar. Which is more than the combined traffic of the New York Times, Fox News, MSNBC, Guardian, et cetera, combined. So the scale of what has actually transpired here is so enormous that I think it's really hard for people to get their head around because also each of us only see our own Truman Show. So the fact that I'm saying these stats, you might say, well, I've never seen a dieting video or anorexia video or someone else might say, I've never seen those conspiracy theories, it's because it fed you some different rabbit hole.

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Tomasello. Who's the YouTube recommendations? Engineer in the film talks about an interview we did with him on our podcast, how he the algorithm found out that he liked seeing these videos of plane landings. And it's this weird, addictive corner of YouTube where people like to see plane landings or the example of flat earth conspiracy theories, which are recommended hundreds of

millions of times. And because we've been doing this work for such a long time and I've talked to so many people, I hear from teachers and parents who say, you know, suddenly all these kids are coming into my classroom and they're saying the Holocaust didn't happen or they're saying the earth is flat.

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And it's like, where are they getting these ideas? Especially in a time of coronavirus where parents are forced to sit their kids in front of the new television, the new digital pacifier, which is really just YouTube. You know, they're basically at the whims of whatever that automated system is showing them. And of course, the reason economically why this happened is because the only way that you can broadcast to three billion people in every language is you don't pay any human editors.

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Right. You take out all of those expensive people who said at The New York Times, The Washington Post editorial department or PBS editorial department saying what's good for kids in terms of Saturday Morning or Sesame Street? And you say, let's have a machine decide what's good for people. And the machine cannot know the difference between what we'll watch versus what what we actually really want. And the easiest example there is if I'm driving down a freeway on the five in L.A. and according to YouTube, if my eyes go off to the side and I see a car crash and everybody's eyes go to the side, they look at the car crash, then the world must really want car crashes.

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And the next thing you know, there's a self reinforcing feedback loop of they're feeding us more car crashes and we keep looking at the car crashes. They feed us more and more. That's exactly what's happened over the last ten years with conspiracy theories. And one of the best predictors of whether you will believe in a new conspiracy is whether you already believe in one. And YouTube and Facebook have never made that easier than to sort of open the doorways into a more paranoid style of thinking.

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And just one last thing before handing it back is, you know, I think this is not to vilify all conspiracy, thinking, you know, some conspiracies are real or some notions of what Epstein did with running a child sex ring is all real. So but we need a more nuanced way to see this, because when you're put into a surround sound rabbit hole where everything is a conspiracy theory, everything that's ever happened in the last 50 years is part of some master plan.

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And there's actually the secret cabal that controls everything. And Bill Gates and 5G and conspiracy coronavirus, you know, this is where the thing goes off the rails. And I think this really became apparent to people once they were stuck at home where you're not actually going out into the world, you're not talking to as many neighbors. And so the primary meaning making and sense making system that we are using to navigate reality are these social media products. And I think that is exacerbated the kind of craziness we've seen over the last six months.

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Yeah, well, you're really talking about the formation of cults. And I know you've thought about a lot about cults. And what we have here is a kind of cult factory or, you know, a cult industrial complex that we have built inadvertently. And again, what's the inadvertence is is really interesting because it does it relates directly to the business model. Is this because we have decided that the only way to pay for the Internet or the primary way to pay for the Internet is with ads?

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And when we'll get into the mechanics of this, that is the thing that has dictated everything else we're talking about. And it really is incredible to think about because we you know, we have created a system where indisputably some of the smartest people on Earth, I mean, this is really the where are some of our brightest minds are using the most powerful technology we've ever built not to cure cancer or mitigate climate change or respond to a very real and pressing problem like an emerging pandemic.



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They're spending their time trying to get better at gaming human attention more effectively to sell random products and even random conspiracy theories. Right. In fact, they're doing all of this not merely as a mode of failing to address other real problems, like in mitigating climate change or responding to a pandemic. The consequences of what they're doing is making it harder to respond to those real problems. I mean, we have, you know, climate change and pandemics are now impossible to talk about as a result of what's happening on social media.

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And this is this is a direct result of how social media is being paid for or is how it is. It has decided to make money and as you say, it's making it impossible for us to understand one another because people are not seeing the same things. I mean, like I on a daily basis have this experience of looking at people out in the world, you know, on my own social media feed, or he's just reading news accounts of what somebody is into a military, somebody who's into Kuhn.

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Right. And this cult is not too strong a word, this cult of indeterminate size. But you know massively well subscribe at this point for people who believe that not only is child sexual abuse a real problem out there in the world, it's more or less everyone believes, but they believe that there are uncountable numbers of high profile, well connected people, you know, from the Clintons on down who are part of a cannibalistic cult of child sexual slavery, you know, where they extract the bodily essences of children so as to prolong their lives.

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Right. I mean, it's just it's just crazy as crazy. Yes. And so so when I as someone who's outside this information stream view this behavior, people look, frankly, insane to me. Right. And some of these people have to be crazy. Right. This has to be acting like a bug light for four crazy people of at least of some sort. But most of the people are presumably normal people who are just drinking from a firehose of misinformation and just different information from the information I'm seeing.

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And so their behavior is is actually inexplicable to me. And there's so many versions of this now. I don't think it's too much to say that we're driving ourselves crazy. We're creating a culture that is not compatible with basic sanity. I mean, we're amplifying incommensurable delusions everywhere all at once. And we've created a system where true information, real facts and, you know, valid, you know, skeptical analysis of what's going on isn't up to the task of dampening down the spread of lies.

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And I mean, maybe there's some other variable here that accounts for it. But it's amazing to me how much of this is borne of simply the choice over a business model. Well, I think this is, to me, the most important aspect of what the film hopefully will do is right now we're living in the shattered prism of a shared reality where we're each trapped in a separate shaft. And like you said, when you look over at someone else and say, how can they believe those crazy things?

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How can they be so stupid? Aren't they seeing the same information that I'm seeing? And the answer is they're not seeing the same information that you're seeing. They've been living literally in a completely different feed of information than you have, and that's actually one of the other, I think, psychological, not so much vulnerabilities, but we did not evolve to assume that every person you would see physically around you would, inside of their own mind, be actually living in a completely different virtual reality than the one that you live in.

[00:34:17.500]

So nothing from an evolutionary perspective would enable us to have empathy with the fact that each of us have our own little virtual reality in our own minds and that each of them could be so dramatically, not just a little bit so dramatically different. Because another aspect you mentioned

when you brought up cults at the beginning of what you said was the power of groupthink and the power of an echo chamber where many of what's going on, many of the things that are going on in conspiracy theory groups on Facebook, I mean, the pandemic video spread actually through a massive network of Kuhn groups.

[00:34:48.020]

There's actually been a capturing of the new spirituality and sort of in psychedelics type community into the human world.

[00:34:54.610]

Interestingly, which I thought these people made acid. Yeah, that's doesn't sound like a good addition to an already mad world. But I think if we zoom out, it's like the question is who's in control of human history right now? Are human beings authoring our own choices? Or by the fact that we've ceded the information that feeds into three billion people's brains meant that we have actually ceded control to machines because the machines control the information that all all three billion of us are getting.

[00:35:23.950]

It's become the primary way that we make sense of the world. And to jump ahead of mind, read some of the skeptics out there, some people saying, well, hold on a second, weren't there filter bubbles and narrow partisan echo chambers with Fox News and MSNBC and people sticking with those channels? Yes, that's true. But I would ask people to question, where are the editorial departments of those television channels getting their news from?

[00:35:44.710]

Well, they're just living on Twitter, and Twitter's algorithms are recommending, again, that same partisan echo chamber. Back to you. If you follow, as you had Rene D'Arista on your podcast, who's a dear friend and amazing colleague talking about how radicalization spreads on social media. And she worked back in the State Department in twenty fifteen where they noticed that if you followed one ISIS terrorist on on Twitter, the suggested user system would say, oh, there's suggested.

[00:36:09.180]

You might want to follow, and it gives you 10 more suggested ISIS terrorists for you to follow. Likewise, if you were a new mom, as she was several years ago and you joined some new mom groups, specifically groups for like making your own baby food, kind of a do it yourself organic moms movement. Well, Facebook's algorithm said, well, hold on, what are other suggested groups we might show for you that tend to correlate with users in this mom group that keeps people really engaged?

[00:36:33.030]

And one of the top recommendations was the anti vaccine conspiracy theory groups. And when you join one of those, it says, well, those groups tend to be also in these criminal on groups and chem trails groups and the flat earth groups. And so you see very quickly how these tiny little changes, as they say in the journal, says in the beginning of the film, the business model of just changing your beliefs and identity, just one percent, changing the entire world, one percent is a lot.

[00:36:56.580]

It's like climate change, quite literally, right, where you only have to change the temperature a tiny bit and change the basis of what people are believing. And it changes the rest of reality, because, as you know, from confirmation bias, when you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail. And technology is laying the foundation of hammers that are looking for specific kinds of nails. Once you see the world in a paranoid conspiratorial lens, you are seeing you're looking for evidence that confirms that belief and that's happening on all sides is really a thing that's happened to all of us.

[00:37:24.910]

This is why my biggest hope, really, in the global impact of the film, and this is not a marketing push. It's really a a social impact push. Like I genuinely am concerned that there may be no other way to put Humpty Dumpty back together again than to show the world that we have created that we need a new shared reality about that breakdown of our shared reality.

[00:37:44.800]

There are many aspects to the ad model, and I think people can get it. It doesn't take much work to convince people as we've I hope we have begun to hear that the shattering of shared reality is a problem, at minimum, a political problem. I mean, whether it's a social problem for you, you know, out in the world or in your primary relationships to see the kind of hyper partisanship we see now and the and the inability to converge on an account of basic facts that could mitigate that partisanship, I think people feel that that is a kind of assault on democracy.

[00:38:25.690]

And then when you add the piece that bad actors like the Russians or the Chinese or anyone can decide to deliberately game that system. I mean, just the knowledge that, you know, Russia is actively spreading black lives matter information and pseudo information so as to heighten the anguish and polarization on that topic in America. I mean, that just the fact that we've built the tools by which they can do that and they can do it surreptitiously. Right. We don't see who's seen these ads.

[00:38:56.950]

Right. You don't see the the 50000 people who were who were targeted in a specific state for a specific reason that is new and sinister. And I think people can understand that. But when you're we're talking about the problem with sharing information or using our information in these ways.

[00:39:16.480]

And I think we should get clear about what's happening here, because this is a distinction several people make in the film. It's not that these platforms sell our data or they don't really sell our data. They gather the data, they analyze the data. And what they sell are more and more accurate predictions of our behavior to advertisers. Right. And the ability to and as they gets more refined, you really have a as close as we've ever come to advertising being a kind of sure thing.

[00:39:49.090]

Right. Where it really, you know, it really works. And and even there are people. I think most people. Won't necessarily care about that, because if you tell them, listen, the thing you really thought you wanted and went out and bought, you were played by the company, the company placed an ad with Facebook and Facebook, delivered it to you because you were the perfect target of that ad. I think the person can, at the end of the day, own all of that process and say and just subsume it with their satisfaction at having bought the thing they they now actually want.

[00:40:28.250]

So, yeah, I actually but I want I wanted a new Prius. Right. I mean, that's it was time I needed a new car. I think there's some whether it's confabulating or not, there's some way in which they don't necessarily feel violated. And I think when I think people think they care about privacy, but we don't really seem to care about privacy all that much. I mean, we care about convenience and we care about money at bottom.

[00:40:53.150]

Nobody wants to pay for these things. No one wants to pay for Facebook. They don't want to pay for Twitter. They don't want to pay for most of what happens on the Internet. And they're happy to be enrolled in this psychological experiment so that they don't have to pay for anything. And that's and the dysfunction of all of that is what we're trying to get across here. But it's I'm always amazed that it's you focus on it and parts of this monstrosity begin to disappear.

[00:41:20.420]

You know, it's like it's very hard to keep what is wrong with this in view every moment all at once. And so maybe for the moment, let's just focus on, you know, information and privacy and and the ad model and just how we should think about it.

[00:41:36.470]

Well, when we talk about the advertising model, you know, people tend to think about the good faith

uses, like you're talking about a Prius or a pair of shoes. What this means is the geopolitical world or three information warfare that it's happening right now because, you know, like I say often is, you know, while we've been obsessed with protecting our physical borders as a country, we've left the digital border wide open. I mean, if Russia or China tried to fly a cruise missile or a bomber plane into the United States, they'd be blasted out of the sky by the Pentagon.

[00:42:06.170]

But when they try to fly an information bomb into the United States in our virtual infrastructure of Facebook, they're met by a white glove that says, yes, exactly which zip code in which African-American subdistrict would you like to target?

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And that that is the core problem. We are completely unprotected when it comes to the virtual infrastructure.

[00:42:24.470]

So if you go to the the roads and the air and the telephone telephone lines that we we use here in this country, they're completely escaped from, you know, Russia or China. But when most of the activity happening in our country happens in a virtual digital online environment, you know, as Marc Andreessen says, software is eating the world, meaning software and the digital world are consuming more and more of the physical world and the physical ways that we use to get around in the physical conversations we used to have.

[00:42:50.510]

That digital environment is basically the big five tech companies. It's all happening through the landscape of YouTube, ticktock, Facebook, et cetera. And how does an empire fall? You know, you use the power of an empire against itself. You know, after World War two, you know, we had all these nukes and the big powers couldn't do conventional wars with each other. So they had to use subtler methods, plausible deniability, proxy wars. You'd be waging economic warfare, diplomatic warfare.

[00:43:16.220]

But if you were Russia or Iran or Turkey, you know, and you don't want to see the US in a position of global dominance, would you do a forward facing attack on the country with all the nukes? You know, obviously not. But would you take the already existing tensions of that country and turn the enemy against himself? That's what Sun Tzu would say to do. You know, that's what China's military strategy would say to do. And Facebook just makes that a trillion times easier.

[00:43:39.140]

So, you know, if I was China, I would want extreme right and extreme left groups to proliferate and fight each other. And, you know, we know that this is basically happening and this has been stoking up groups on all sides. You know, I can go into your country and create an army of bots that look just as indistinguishable from regular people. If I'm China, I'm running ticktock. And I can, you know, manipulate the political discourse in your country with the fact that I have three hundred million Americans, you know, on my service, I might even be bigger than that incorrectly.

[00:44:04.850]

So I think, you know, the advertising model isn't just that it enables these good faith users. I think people have to recognize the amount of manipulated and deceptive activities that are almost, like you said, untraceable. I mean, the fact that I'm saying all this to you and the listeners out there would sound like a conspiracy theory until, you know, the researchers who are tracking these things, because if you're if you're just looking at your own feed, I'm living in California.

[00:44:26.630]

I'm not actually part of a targeted group. So I don't really see these things. And it's actually invisible to me, anybody who is. So, again, our psychological vulnerabilities here, technology is not allowing us to empathize with people who are closest to being harmed by these systems.

[00:44:42.170]

Yeah, OK. So I think people can get the central fear here, which is that it seems at best difficult, more likely impossible to run a healthy democracy. On bad information, I mean, if we can do it for a few years, we probably can't do it for a century. Something has to change here. We can't be feeding everyone lies or half truths, different lies and different half truths all at once, 24 hours a day, year after year, and hope to have a healthy society.

[00:45:20.870]

Right. So that's a discernable piece of this problem that I think virtually everyone will understand. And then when you add the the emotional valence of all these lies and half truths, people get that there's a problem amplifying outrage. Right? I mean, the fact that the thing that is most captivating to us is the feeling of ingroup outrage pointed outward toward the outgroup for whom we have contempt growing into hatred. That's the place we are so much of the time on social media that runs the, you know, the gears of this machinery faster than than any other emotion.

[00:46:06.110]

And whatever the you know, if that changes tomorrow, if it turns out that, you know, sheer terror is better than outrage, well, then the algorithm will find that and it will be amplified terror. But the thing that you have to be sure of is that it's contained in the very word, you know, a dispassionate take on current events is never going to be the thing that gets this this machinery running hottest. Right. And so I think people can get that.

[00:46:35.840]

But when we talk about possible remedies for this problem, then I really think it is hard to see a path for so many ways to come at. If you'd like to continue listening to this podcast, you'll need to subscribe at Sam Harris. Doug, you'll get access to all full length episodes of the Making Sense podcast and to other subscriber only content, including bonus episodes and Amma's and the conversations I've been having on the Waking Up app. The Making Sense podcast is ad free and relies entirely on listener support.

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