

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

Episode 15: Changing our Climate of Denial

Tristan Harris: Hi, everybody. Welcome to Your Undivided Attention. Aza and I are trying something a little bit different this time because we're living in a new world with the coronavirus, and it's moving very quickly, and it's also Earth Day and we wanted to have a specific conversation about climate change and especially how it relates to the coronavirus. There's a lot of parallels and similarities. And many people don't know this, but one of the reasons we started the Center for Humane Technology was our concern that you can't actually address a problem like climate change without fixing the way technology platforms organize our reality and our sense of agency and action.

Tristan Harris: So today, we're going to have Tony Leiserowitz from the Yale Center for Climate Communications on to talk about what lessons we can learn in how we design technology to support positive, optimistic, empowering, coordinated action on the problem.

Tristan Harris: I'm Tristan Harris.

Aza Raskin: I'm Aza Raskin, and this is Your Undivided Attention.

Anthony Leiserowitz: So my basic pathway is that I started as a major in International Relations and I studied Cold War politics. I really thought I had a long career ahead of me trying to keep the world from blowing itself up with nuclear weapons, so I did a lot of studying of the Soviet Union and China and U.S. nuclear policy. Six months before I graduated, however, the Berlin Wall came down and my International Relations degree turned into a history degree overnight. And so I wasn't really sure what I was going to do at that point, and so I ended up following a friend out to, of all places, Aspen, Colorado.

Anthony Leiserowitz: I thought I was going to just be a ski bum, travel around the world, enjoying my 20s, and instead, I ended up getting a real job at a little place called The Aspen Global Change Institute, which is a world-class institute that brings together many of the world's top climate change and global environmental scientists. I spent four years there. I ultimately became the Education Coordinator, and it was an incredible experience working with some of the most brilliant minds in climate change. And this was in the year 1990, so relatively early in at least a public phase of the issue. It was just this incredible education. I mean, just what we knew, even back then, was very clear. I mean, really, the broad outlines have not changed that much in the intervening 30 years. We knew that the world was warming. We knew that it was going to have all kinds of dire consequences. We knew that we needed to bend the curve on carbon pollution starting as soon as possible.

Anthony Leiserowitz: But anyway, by the end of that experience, I found myself getting a little frustrated not because of the people, the people were fantastic, but I felt like on the end, because we were talking about the consequences of climate change mostly as well as the causes, I ultimately felt like we were talking about symptoms and not the underlying reasons why we have this problem in the first place, because the reason we have climate change is human beings, same with biodiversity extinctions, and the ozone hole, and all the other issues we were looking at. It's human perceptions, it's human's decisions, it's human choices, it's human behavior that's created each of these problems. So I really felt like the key question was,

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what do we need to know about human beings that got us into these problems in the first place? And likewise, if we really want to solve them, the answer is going to lie in the social sciences and in humanities, probably not in the natural sciences.

Anthony Leiserowitz: So that just basically led me on a search back into graduate school where I had just a great fortune to work with lots of different scholars from lots of different fields to really try to understand those deep, deep questions. And I'm still in pursuit of those questions today.

Aza Raskin: One of the things human beings are very bad at are visualizing exponentials. It's just something we cannot do. And behind the flattening the curve we're all familiar with now for COVID, there's an even bigger flat the curve for climate change. I'm curious from that understanding of human behavior at how human beings perceive the world. What's blocking us as human beings? And what do communications need to solve so that we can make those far off things close, tangible, feelable, touchable?

Anthony Leiserowitz: Yeah, great question. Let's see, you got about three months? Because this is a full class. So, look, this is taking place at multiple levels. So let's start just with core human psychology, the way the brain works. So we know that broadly speaking, the human brain has two very different processing systems. One is what we call the analytic system. It's codes reality and words and numbers and abstract symbols. It's very slow and deliberate. It's rational, it's logical. I mean, science itself is one of the preeminent expressions of that. And it's an incredibly powerful way of thinking. It's given us our entire modern civilization. It's allowed us to send a spaceship beyond the solar system. It's an incredibly powerful tool, but it takes a lot of discipline. I mean, you literally have to be disciplined - and that's why we call them disciplines in academia - how to think that way, okay? It's not something that we're born with.

Anthony Leiserowitz: But we also have this other parallel processing system that we loosely call the experiential system. And it's the realm of images and feelings and associations. It's very quick, it's intuitive. It's basically the system that we share with many other animal species on the planet. And it's this system that, frankly, has allowed us to survive for millions of years. It's the system that you know when you're walking in the woods and you suddenly hear a crack of a stick behind you, your body immediately goes into essentially fight or flight mode, right? And that's long before your conscious brain catches up and says, "Oh, where did that come from?" Because from a stone age perspective, that might be a saber-toothed tiger about to jump on you, so you got to be ready to react.

Anthony Leiserowitz: Those two systems are constantly at play at the same time in us. So the deeper cultural issue is that here in the West, we've tended to see them as polar opposites and that we've tended to privilege one over the other. Reason? Good feeling and emotion bad. That's actually a completely bonkers way of thinking about it because in terms of neuroscience, those different parts of the brain are absolutely interconnected by bazillions, and that's a scientific term, interconnections, right? So the fact is that even when you're trying to be as rational as possible, you're still getting the influence of those emotion centers. It's

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actually been found you can't make a good decision, because what's good? Good is something that you learn from that experiential system, not from the analytics.

Anthony Leiserowitz: So anyway, that's just background to say that these things are also playing out in the issue of climate change, and it, frankly, is similar in COVID. This has basically been like an X-ray of the fact that some of us tend to rely more on analytic thinking, and some of us tend to rely more on that experiential thinking. Look, the scientists were clear back in December that this epidemic was moving fast. I mean, those models had been built for years of what a global pandemic would look like. There were warnings all over the place, including at the very highest levels like the World Health Organization. This was how it's going to play out across the world.

Anthony Leiserowitz: It was invisible to most people. I mean, many people here in the United States looked around and said, "Well, that's only happening in China. There's nobody here that has it." Or even when a few people had it, "Just a few people in a country of over 300 million, I don't know anybody that has it." That's an incredibly dangerous way to make decisions if you're just basing them on your own direct experience, because by the time you've directly experienced COVID, in yourself or in your friends or family networks, it's too late. I mean, it's now gotten way beyond what's controllable.

Anthony Leiserowitz: So there is a kind of an X-ray example in our lived experience right now of these two different systems, and that they lead people to make decisions in very different ways. That same thing is, of course, happening with climate change, as you just said. The core cause of climate change is just, one important example, is CO2. And if your listeners are near a window, you can look out the window right now and there's CO2 pouring out of tailpipes, assuming there's cars going by. It's coming out of smoke stack, it's coming out of your house, it's coming out of your mouth and nose this very second. But until I said it, you weren't conscious of it because it's invisible. If CO2 was black, or pink, or some bright color, and we saw it everywhere around us, belching out of all of those different sources, we would have taken action on this a long time ago. Likewise, the impacts have been largely invisible to most people. They don't realize that, in fact, climate change is here and now.

Anthony Leiserowitz: I would just end with saying, that's been one of our main findings for over a decade, is that many Americans continue to think of climate change as distant, distant in time, but the impacts won't be felt for a generation or more, and distant in space. This is about polar bears or some developing countries, but not the United States, not my state, not my community, not my family, not my friends, not me. And as a result, it's psychologically distant. It's just one of a dozen other issues that's out there. I kind of wish somebody might do something about it, but I don't see why it's urgent. I don't see why it's should be a high priority. And again, you can see there's the similarity with COVID. It was happening somewhere over on the other side of the planet, didn't seem like that was going to ever be a problem here, until it was.

Tristan Harris: Yeah, totally. And when I think about also the psychology of human denial, even Aza and, I remember we were talking back in January, and we had friends who were actually shutting the alarm bells about this, but it was hard, I will admit

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myself, to sort of fully say, "Wow, I should treat this as the global rerouting emergency that's going to change everything," because that's an uncomfortable thing. It's better to sort of say, "Well, I already had those things booked on my calendar. I already had those plans. I'm going to keep going there." I once spent a whole year basically studying the psychology of denial, because I was so fascinated by how you can simultaneously know something and not know it at the same time. Again, it's not like I wasn't aware of epidemiology or didn't understand what my friends were saying who were more dialed into this.

Tristan Harris: And so I think that's another aspect here. It's like if you're so smart, why aren't you rich? Like if you're so right that this is the apocalypse, then why isn't everyone running around? And I think the dependence on social psychology that we depend on other people noticing and responding and acting as if something is wrong, and that's the importance of those top-down government actions which say, "Okay, let's all shelter in place." Until that happens, your perception is flipped. The people who are doing "the wrong thing", who just walking around acting like everything is normal, that's what your eyeballs see. So your eyeballs are seeing the people who are doing "the wrong thing", and the people who doing the right thing, sheltering in place at home, are not visible.

Tristan Harris: I think it's very similar in just the same sense of what got us here won't get us there. The brain evolutionary hardware that got us to this point, that helped us survive is exactly the opposite of what we need to get us to the next phase. And that's true in general about most of the beliefs that we carry, and we have to be in a process of conscious evolution. That's kind of where my mind goes and hearing you go. But what I want to riff with you is I know that you have done some very deep work on where the psychology on climate change has been over the last, I think it's a few decades now with the Six Americas study. What is the current state of the art about climate psychology in, let's go to the United States because I think it is a country that matters so much for shaping what the Paris Agreement gets continued or not or how we vote, et cetera?

Anthony Leiserowitz: Sure. So we already talked about the individual level psychology, right? Like how the brain works. Well, of course, the brain exists within a body, and that body exists within a social context. And so there's a social psychology, and then beyond that, especially in the United States, there's a political psychology. So let's put a pin there, because that's important too.

Anthony Leiserowitz: So the social psychology is exactly right, I mean, what you were just saying, that this is the realm of what we call social norms, that there are these kind of unwritten cultural rules that guide so much of our daily lives, and I'll use the concrete example from my life. When I grew up, there was smoking everywhere. It was in bars, it was in restaurants. If you flew across the country, you'd be strapped to your seat with 50 other people in a metal tube all puffing away. You couldn't get away from it. If we were all sitting around a table together right now and I pulled out a cigarette, you'd probably recoil in horror, okay? That's not because of a law, that's not because of regulations, that's because the social norm, the expectation of what proper behavior is has so shifted in our society? Well, it turns out those social norms are hugely important in how people think about and respond to climate change, as well as COVID.

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Anthony Leiserowitz: So let me just go to COVID for a moment, because we've just done a big national study and we've got a paper in prep. So this is not peer reviewed yet, but it basically is very consistent with everything else we know about human communication patterns. Is that, yes, there's top down communication, right? There's what you're hearing from President Trump, there's what you're hearing from the governors, there's what you're hearing from the CDC and Anthony Fauci, the top-down vertical communication. But it's also incredibly important to pay attention to the horizontal communication, in other words, the communication that we're having with our friends and our family, and that includes not just the emails that we send, or the social media posts that we post, or the conversations we're having, but it's also the role modeling we're doing, right? If everybody else around you is sheltering in place, that you and your friend and family network is all sheltering in place, that's a clear signal that something is really important to all of the people around you. And in fact, if they expect you to do the same, there are social costs if you refuse to do that, because they will look at you weird like, what's wrong with you, dude?

Anthony Leiserowitz: So those social norms turn out to play a really important role in how we respond not just to COVID, but also to climate change. And again, there's lots of interesting things here for both good and bad. If nobody else is seemingly taking it seriously, then many people think, well, then it's not a big issue. But on the flip side, we also know that... In fact, a good colleague of mine here at Yale, did a neat study where he found that when a homeowner put solar panels on their roof, it greatly increases the odds that somebody else in that neighborhood is going to put solar panels on their roof because it's a form of role modeling. It's a form of social signaling and display. So yes, as Aristotle said, we are social animals. We are absolutely influenced by what the people that we care about are doing around us.

Aza Raskin: One of the thoughts that hits me as you say those things is because we are all now stuck at home, the way we see the world is through sort of the telescope of our technology, which is to say that technology has become our social fabric. They're kind of social habitat design. And the way those systems are designed deeply affects how we perceive, how we see the people around us, those horizontal connections as well as the vertical connections. And so I think about the immense power that the social platforms wield, to give one example from 2010, Facebook put up one message one time that use social proof to get people to go vote, and it just showed six of your friends that had already gone to vote, said, "These people vote, so should you." You click one button. That got 340,000 people like their butts out of their chairs to a polling place that would not have gotten voted before. And that's like the smallest most atomized version of this one.

Aza Raskin: One major question I have for you is, we live in this discontinuous time with COVID. I look around and I see a whole bunch of climate positive norms potentially being set, things like, why fly across the country for a meeting when you could just Zoom in? I had a Seder with my family in New York. What are the social norms we should be pushing and cementing now? And especially if we can pull the levers of the social habitat design, what are the opportunities here?

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Anthony Leiserowitz: Well, they're incredible. I don't think we all know the answer to that yet, because we're making it up as we go. There's just a ton of stuff. I mean, look at what it's doing to online commerce. Suddenly, people are discovering, "I don't have to go to the grocery store anymore. I don't have to go clothes shopping anymore. I can do much of that virtually." But this is also happening against the backdrop of an economic crisis, and that too is already affecting things. I mean, we don't know how that's going to work out yet, but if we look back to the Great Depression, and this seems to be getting into that same territory, we don't know that it's going to last as long, but I mean, there are long bread lines already. I mean, not people standing in line, but people in cars for miles waiting to get food boxes.

Anthony Leiserowitz: What we know from the Great Depression era is that many people came out of that changed forever. I mean, it affected their worldview. They became more of savers than they were consumers, more than spenders. So we don't know in many ways how humanity large writ large, because that's the other thing that's happening globally, or more or less at the same time, how this is going to affect social norms, social expectations, what proper behavior is, how you're going to spend your money, what you're going to value in life.

Anthony Leiserowitz: One of the big responses people seem to be having to COVID right now is a real sense of solidarity. The number one emotional reaction people seem to be having is compassion, not fear, not anger, but compassion, because this is a crisis that is obviously having just horrific effects on the people who are stricken with the disease, as well as the impacts on most notably the first responders, right? We hear their stories, we see their tears, we see how frightened they are and how frustrated they are, and so on. Those stories are shaping our collective perception and interpretation of this event as well. So to go back to where you started, yes, the social media platforms are immensely powerful. They do structure the way that we learn about the world, the way we now increasingly come to know what other people think for good and for ill.

Tristan Harris: Do you want to talk a little bit about the different psychologies of climate change for the six different Americas? Just because I think that's some good, quick foundational stuff before we get into how do we meet those psychology because part of this is we have a lot of people listening to this podcast to our designers at technology companies and they're designing for the users' psychology. And I think when it comes to climate change, we're designing for the psychology of people, where they're coming from, and you've done some foundational work on that.

Anthony Leiserowitz: Yeah. So one of the first things that we learned, of course, is that Americans don't have a single viewpoint on climate change, or frankly, any important issue. And so then there's this tendency, though, to divide the world into believers and deniers. And that actually does real violence to the truth. It's actually not that useful of a way of understanding the public. And so over a decade ago, we did a big study and basically identified what we call Global Warming's Six Americas that we've been tracking and trying to come to better understanding of ever since.

Anthony Leiserowitz: In brief, they're kind of arranged along a spectrum. So at one end is a group that we call the alarmed. These are people who think that climate change is happening, it's human caused. They're very worried about it. They're very supportive of

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action. But the main question in their mind is, what can we do about it? And this is an indictment of the climate community, frankly, is that many of these people are absolutely deeply, deeply worried about this issue and want to get involved, but we have not done a very good job explaining what they can do as individuals, what we can do as communities, as states, as the nation and the world. And so they're really hungry to know what can we do.

Anthony Leiserowitz: The next group is a group that we call the concerned. These are people who also think it's happening and human caused and serious, but again, they think of it as distant in time and space. So yes, they do support action, but they don't see why it's urgent. It doesn't seem like it needs to be the absolute top priority.

Anthony Leiserowitz: Then comes a group that we call the cautious, and you can think of them as fence sitters kind of figuring out what this is all about. Is it real, is it not? Is it human, is it natural? Is it a serious problem, is it kind of overblown? They're paying attention, but still kind of confused.

Anthony Leiserowitz: Then a group that's smaller but I think important, that we call the disengaged. And basically, they tell us, "I think I once heard that term global warming, but I don't know what that is. I don't know anything about it. I don't know what the causes are, I don't know what the consequences, I don't know what the solutions are." So for them, it's not ideology or anything like that, it's just lack of awareness.

Anthony Leiserowitz: Then comes a group that we call the doubtful. These are people who say, "I don't think it's real, but if it is, it's just natural cycles. Nothing humans had anything to do with, nothing we can do anything about." So they don't see it as much of a risk.

Anthony Leiserowitz: And then last but not least is a group we call the dismissive, and these are people who are firmly convinced that it's not real, it's not human caused, it's not serious. And moreover, I mean, they quite literally tell us overwhelmingly that they're conspiracy theorists, it's a hoax, it's scientists making up data, it's a UN plot to take away American sovereignty, it's a get-rich scheme by Al Gore and his friends, and many, many others such conspiracy-minded narratives.

Anthony Leiserowitz: The last thing to just say there, because this is all in the context of... The first cardinal rules of effective communication is know your audience. Who are they? What do they know or think they know? What are their values? Who do they trust? Where do they get their information? And so on. Because only once you understand who that audience is, can you then tailor your engagement strategy in such a way that meets them where they are, not where you are? This is like user focused design but in communication side. That's why understanding that there are these six different audiences and they're all coming from completely different starting points on this issue, and you got to know that if you're trying to reach out to them.

Anthony Leiserowitz: Last thing I'll just say about the dismissive in particular, they're only about 10% of the country, they're only 10%, but they are a really loud 10%, they are really vocal 10% and they're more than adequately represented in Congress and in the White House. And they've so dominated the public square, and frankly, our social media platforms that they've made themselves look like they're more than half of the

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country. I'll just give one tiny example. We've had colleagues that looked at this. You take an article about climate change, and say USA Today, good article, providing good facts, everything. Then you look at the comments, and if you start looking through the comments, half or more of those comments can be from the dismissives basically claiming that this is a hoax or bogus or whatever.

Anthony Leiserowitz: So it's really easy, again, back to social norms, to come away with the false impression as a member of the public, as a journalist, as an editor, as a policymaker, with the perception that it's half or more of the country. It's not, they're just loud, and increasingly, not just well-funded, but increasingly sophisticated through bots and other types of technologies to amplify, to make themselves look like they're so much bigger than they actually are.

Tristan Harris: I mean, this is such an important point because in an attention ranked environment sorting for what gets the most attention, the people who are dismissive get such a... it's almost like you're subsidizing the vast scaling up of the people with, let's say the least epistemology guiding the choices. And as you made that list of the alarmed, the concerned, the cautious, the disengaged, I thought you could make a very similar list of people's reactions to the coronavirus and the ways that public communication have moved each of those groups towards taking it more realistically. I know many people who completely doubted it and thought it was a hoax. There're many who still do, probably those who are in communities who don't know anyone who's had it, at least in their physical community. But you've also, just to give people some hope instead of drowning in the despair, each group or the groups that are alarmed, concerned and cautious, have grown a lot in the last few years, have they not?

Anthony Leiserowitz: Yeah. So again, we've been tracking this for about a dozen years now. But in just the past five years, the alarmed, and let's just compare the two ends of the spectrum, the alarmed versus the dismissive, five years ago, they were both around 14 percentage points of the American public, okay?

Tristan Harris: The alarmed and the concerned.

Anthony Leiserowitz: No, the alarmed and the dismissive.

Tristan Harris: The alarmed and the dismissive were each 14%.

Anthony Leiserowitz: Were each about 14%. Five years later, the alarmed have grown to 31% of the country, and the dismissive had dropped to about 11%. So basically, the alarmed have tripled in size and are now basically three times larger in numbers than the dismissive. That's a remarkable shift, and that has played out in all kinds of ways, including our politics. And that's the one thing that hasn't been said here. It's not just individual psychology, and it's not just social psychology, it's political psychology. Because what you find is that what's really driving much of the "debate", which is frankly a false debate about the reality and seriousness of climate change, really it's a conflict over deeper values, political values.

Anthony Leiserowitz: So what we find is that the people who are the most concerned about climate change have what we call egalitarian values. They care deeply about discrimination

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in society, and that the government should be trying to eradicate poverty, and that inequities of wealth within and across nations is a major source of conflict. None of which have anything directly to do with climate change, but people with that worldview are by far the most concerned about climate change. They're the most alarmed.

Anthony Leiserowitz: By contrast, there's a different value system that we call radical individualism, and that's what you find particularly among the dismissive. For them, the one value that trumps - sorry, no pun intended there - all others is individual liberty, individual freedom, individual autonomy, and that's usually framed as anti-government, government's too big, it's too intrusive. There's too much taxation, too much regulation. You know this discourse very well because it's been very well promulgated for the past generation. Those people are deeply motivated. Again, this is what's called motivated reasoning in psychology. They're deeply motivated because they have such a strong adherence to their worldview to be very hostile to the issue of climate change because climate change is like the mother of all collective action problems.

Anthony Leiserowitz: There's no way that you and I and everyone in America, if we just do good individual behavior change, can solve this problem. I mean, I've got colleagues that have tried to calculate that out. If Americans did all the good stuff of changing your diet a bit, flying less, buying a more fuel efficient vehicle, insulating your attic, please insulate your attic, et cetera, we could reduce national emissions by about 9% or 10%, and that would be actually an amazing contribution. There's no silver bullet here, it's going to take a portfolio approach, but it's only 9% or 10%. The other 90% has to come from structural change. This is about changing the way we generate and produce and distribute energy, okay? Going from an 19th century energy system, digging stuff out of the ground and setting it on fire, which is what we're doing, to move into a 21st century energy system, which is harnessing the flow of energy that's all around us, coming from the sun, coming from the wind, in the tides, and so on.

Anthony Leiserowitz: That's really what this is about and that's not something that you can do as individual. These are social choices. I as an individual would love to build myself my own private bullet train from New York city to L.A. I can't do that. I can only do that as a member of a society that decides to do that. If I lived in China, that's a possibility. If I lived in Japan, it's been done, in South Korea and France. Those are all societies that have said, "Yes, these are the kinds of things we're going to invest in collectively," but that's not been possible here in the United States, and in part it's because of this deep animosity to the issue by people who are committed to this particular radical, individualistic worldview.

Tristan Harris: And of course this relates 100% to the response to coronavirus, because if the response was just based on the individual choices that we make like, well, if I want to be safe, I'll just put on a mask, but then everyone else is just coughing and sneezing and going to work and getting everybody sick and people overloading the healthcare system. And then now when I get a broken leg, I don't actually have anyone to care for me. And if I have parents with prescription medicines and then they run into some complication, everyone else dies because of the

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irresponsibility of a very small number of people that start to overload the healthcare system and infect everyone else.

Tristan Harris: And so this moment with coronavirus is like you've said, sort of a UV light or a tracer bullet for finding all the interdependent pockets of society that then reveal what do we have to do as a collective? And so all the things that we're doing from a government response perspective, as a public communications perspective, and all the lessons that you just said, we learned those lessons in the great depression to move towards a savings oriented relationship to, say finance. How would we most leverage those lessons now? And then what particularly, because the whole point of this podcast is to think about how the technology platforms, are in a role to coordinate that effective communication and those lessons that we're learning now? Because even though you said, I think you said it was a 9%, we make a 9% dent in climate if every American did the right thing by switching to the right kind of diet and a Tesla and all that kind of stuff.

Tristan Harris: But we also, the tech platforms, reach three billion people, three billion people. And in the case of coronavirus, we've written a piece saying the tech platforms can reach three billion people before irresponsible governments can and before the virus can. So if you were in charge of Facebook with all the lessons that you know from what is ineffective communication to what is really effective communication. And then leveraging this lesson that is being for better or worse given to everyone who's going to be affected by this, I don't know, it's a big prompt, but I think that's why I think this conversation was so interesting for us to have with you.

Anthony Leiserowitz: Well, you're right. So it is absolutely immense. I think there's so much they can do. So look, there's the way they structured their platforms to promote good information versus promoting disinformation and misinformation, right? So unfortunately, Facebook and Google and YouTube have become major sources of mis- and disinformation. So misinformation being not unintendedly bad information. People had good intentions, it just was wrong. For example, I think Geraldo Rivera was pushing this idea that if you just drank water, you could flush the coronavirus into your stomach where the acid would kill it, right?

Tristan Harris: I heard that 5G towers actually kill the coronavirus.

Anthony Leiserowitz: Well, let's see. Now there's a whole new conspiracy theory that 5G is causing the coronavirus.

Tristan Harris: Wait, what? That goes completely against knowledge that...

Anthony Leiserowitz: I'm sorry. See, these things cut lots of different ways, and we can get into a whole separate conversation about what drives conspiracy theorizing, but the point is, is that there's a lot of just bad information or misinformation. There's also, of course, evildoers who are doing what they can to disrupt societies through disinformation to try to achieve their often political goals. So unfortunately, these platforms have gotten hijacked. So there's been a real backlash and they're beginning to respond. There's certainly a lot more that they could do, but one is just trying to filter out that bad information. There are also things that could be

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done, in this is research that we've done, to help inoculate people. It's funny we're talking about this in the context of a potential vaccine, but that's an approach that's actually been used very successfully to defend good information.

Anthony Leiserowitz: So we did a study with this on climate change where we know that one of the key things most people don't understand is that there's just this overwhelming scientific consensus about the reality and the human causation of climate change. Over 97% of climate scientists have been convinced by the evidence that human caused global warming is happening. Most people have no idea, okay? Only 22% of Americans know that there's that kind of consensus. And so when you just expose people to that very simple fact, they change, they update their priors. They say, "Oh, gosh, I didn't know that." And what we find is that the more they then accept that the experts have reached this conclusion, the more they then update their own beliefs, they say, "Well, look, that's what the experts think, so I think climate change is real and I think it's human caused and I become more worried about it and I become more supportive of policy action."

Anthony Leiserowitz: The problem is, is that the denial community has understood this for about 20 years, and that has been one of the primary ways of, essentially, propaganda to try to undercut the whole issue. This is a chapter and verse strategy taken right out of the tobacco wars, okay? The tobacco industry realized they didn't have to convince Americans that smoking was good for you, they just had to convince you that the experts were still arguing about whether it was good or bad. And in that state of uncertainty, many, many people continued to smoke and the tobacco companies literally raked in billions of dollars over many years because doubt is our product. It was actually discovered in their files. That exact same strategy, including some of the exact same "scientists" who are making that argument or some of the exact same people who are arguing that climate change isn't real or it's not human caused or it's not a serious problem.

Anthony Leiserowitz: So what we found is that when you just expose people to the truth, they update their priors, they change their views. But if you expose them to the counter argument, it tends to freeze them. But if you can inoculate, if you can help people know, just like a vaccine, you get exposed to a little bit of the harmful agent, say the flu virus, your body develops its own antibodies that can protect against it. The same kind of thing actually happens in terms of communication and messaging. If you can give people a message like, you may hear that there's not a scientific consensus, but you need to know there's the fossil fuel industry with a huge profit motive that's mostly pushing that claim, that basically inoculates people against the influence of that argument when they come across it in the wild. So that's another example of a concept that the tech companies could use as part of their platforms.

Aza Raskin: It strikes me that at the very root are information ecology now being controlled so much by these platforms. These platforms incentive is in fact to create a kind of systemic doubt where the most salacious piece of news, the thing that gets the most clicks, essentially whatever piece of content competing against all their pieces of content that are the best at capturing attention is the one that it amplifies the most.

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Aza Raskin: In thinking about our friend, Renee DiResta's work, she has a term for this thing called conspiracy correlation matrix, which is a fancy way of saying that best predictor to know if somebody is going to believe a conspiracy theory is whether they already believe in one conspiracy theory than the Facebook groups, as just one example, tries to recommend itself to the person that it's most likely to accept an invitation to come in. And so what does it do? It's using all of its A/B testing data about you to choose the perfect conspiracy that exactly matches your potentials because it out conspiracy theories also are very good at grabbing attention. So I wonder at the base level, they're the designs of our systems, so tilting the floor against this higher ground.

Anthony Leiserowitz: Oh, boy. Well, this is definitely much more your area of expertise than mine, but I guess I would go back to fundamentals, right? What are the values that underlie each of these decisions that ultimately end up being the structures of these platforms, okay? Because there's always a value judgment being made. And if your value is we need attention more than anything else, and I understand because attention is monetizeable, right? That's why they do it. But if that becomes the end-all be-all, then you're going to end up with ridiculous situations where a platform is going to basically turn a blind eye to, at best, and actively promote misinformation just simply because it's going to get more clicks and more eyeballs. That's a value choice and that's where these companies are part of larger societies that can ultimately rebel against that and say, "Wait a second, we don't approve of that. It's degrading the underlying society in which you operate, and we all operate as part of together and you can lose your social license and maybe even lose your actual license."

Anthony Leiserowitz: I mean, again, you guys are much better experts at this than I am, but it's the difference between the media companies. The media companies aren't allowed to just say whatever they want. There are very strict rules that guide how ABC, NBC, the traditional networks, et cetera, what they can and cannot do because they also serve in the public interest, though that is of course an interest that's been degraded a lot over the years. But still-

Tristan Harris: I think due in part to the technology companies as well by harvesting the attention...

Anthony Leiserowitz: Of course, this is really complex, but my understanding is that the social media companies do not operate under those same rules and restrictions. So that's changing because of things like the EU. So anyway, these are huge structural questions about what are the responsibilities of these platforms to help support the functioning of the societies in which they depend, in which they exist.

Tristan Harris: Yeah. I mean, one thing that just comes to mind, we don't really talk about this very much, but my own personal reasons for working on this is that I actually think we can't solve climate change unless we change the technology platforms. And the reason is that if you view them as making up more and more of our media ecosystem over time, not less and less, obviously people will still do TV and radio, et cetera, but people are going to be moving as they already are, especially in a quarantine world and possibly a post-quarantine world where people are spending more time on social platforms. They are the dedicated social habitats.

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They are our reality constructing infrastructure. They're going to be reliant more and more on that. And not just if climate misinformation makes its way through, but even the case where climate information makes its way through.

Tristan Harris: I'm someone who's highly climate interested, so my newsfeed, at least up until the coronavirus is actually post after post after post of climate related news. But what kind of news is it? It's basically learned helplessness. It's basically, it's worse than you thought and there's nothing you can do. And each article, the subtext is, "It's worse than you thought, and there's nothing you can do," which again goes to the kind of fundamental misalignment between technology and humanity, that just giving people "the " or the truth framed in a sort of hands off way can actually be counterproductive, and then feed into more anxiety and more addictive loops, because I need that hit again because I have to run away from that anxiety I just got from that climate news article.

Tristan Harris: And so I think our whole kind of collective project here is while the technology platforms might inhibit our three billion person reality constituting infrastructure's capacity, to respond to the climate crisis, if we were to change technology in a deep way, not just the information way, but in a deep way, based on what we understand about human psychology, it could be one of the few things that might enable mass collective action consensus agreement. So instead of getting just infinite clickbait on climate news, you also get invitations to start your own climate action group and invite five friends, and here's the friends who are already posting about climate change, and boom, here's the first action you can take. Go to a local bank and to switch to a local credit union where they don't invest in fossil fuels and divest from fossil fuels.

Tristan Harris: Facebook and other companies could be instrumenting the kind of mass collective action that's been missing from this. And to do that, it would take a very different relationship to designing for the kind of optimistic and empowering and hopeful and kind of vivid action that we really need. I mean, we're talking about very short timelines here, and I'm just curious when you think about that, I mean, if you were put in charge of Facebook or just had an audience of all the technology company executives, what would you want them to know to take actions that were commensurate to the size of the problem, just like we've been wanting Facebook and the other companies to take action commensurate to the size of lives that we don't have to lose if we do effective communication to people around coronavirus?

Anthony Leiserowitz: Well, so that's not a small question, but here's how... So I actually recently published a chapter called Building Public and Political Will for Climate Action, where you see over and over again the failure to take big, big steps are always chalked up to a lack of political will. And while there are a number of different influences on political will, I argue in this chapter that one of the big ones that we've frankly walked away from, from the original Earth Day, is people power, is that what the climate community, what the environmental community, what many other progressively minded communities have largely done is walk away from their primary source of power, which is the public, and not just any public. It's fine to have a majority of the public on your side, don't get me wrong, that's important

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for any political leader who doesn't want to get crosswise with their constituents, but more important is what we call, in political science terms, an issue public.

Anthony Leiserowitz: This is a small set, relatively small set of citizens who are deeply, deeply, passionately engaged with a particular issue. And you know what issue publics are. It's the pro choice or anti-abortion movement. It's the pro or anti-immigration movement. It's the gun control movement or the NRA. Let's take the NRA. The NRA has had a tremendous influence over our gun policies in this country. Over 90% of Americans support background checks. We don't have background checks. Why? Because there's this thing called the NRA and their allies. Do you know how big the NRA is in a society of over 300 million people? They're about four million people, four million, and yet they punch way above their weight. Why? Because they're passionate and they're organized. They're organized for power, and that's one of the big things that's still missing in the climate movement.

Anthony Leiserowitz: Just to put that into context, the alarmed are about 71 million Americans, and of the alarmed, we've actually asked them, "Would you be willing to join a campaign if you were asked?" About 21 million say yes, they definitely would. I'm not even including those that say that they probably would. In other words, the alarmed as a potential, as a latent issue public, outnumber the NRA five to one, but the difference is that the NRA is organized and the climate community is not yet organized for power.

Anthony Leiserowitz: So here's back to your question about what could the tech companies do, I think there's a need for a climate activism dating service. And I say that and my activist friends say, "Oh yeah, we definitely need a dating service." And I'm like, "No, no, no, that's not what I mean. That's not about getting you a date. What I mean is that there are millions of Americans out there who want to get involved, they want to get engaged, but they don't know where to go and they don't know what they can do.

Anthony Leiserowitz: What I'm talking about is just like the dating services are, there needs to be some sort of way that you could go, you get asked a few basic survey questions that kind of get a sense of what is it that you're willing to do? Is it donate money? Fine. Is it change your light bulbs? Okay. Is it chain yourself to a bulldozer? Okay. There are so many different kinds of actions, but then the goal is to get them engaged with a local community. So it's part of a social group, not something that you just do by clicking on your computer. That's not what I'm talking about. It's about engaging with actual people in your community and learning from each other, growing together, learning how to become an active citizen together. And what you find is that people very quickly start to advance. They might start with changing their light bulbs, but before you know it, they're actually going and meeting with their elected officials and saying, "Goddammit, you're going to take action on this, or we're going to organize against you, or we're going to organize for you because you're a champion on this issue."

Anthony Leiserowitz: So I'm just saying that that's just like an example, is we're lacking the... what's the thing they always say about like cable or high speed fiber optics? It's the last-

Aza Raskin: Last mile.

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Tristan Harris: Last mile.

Anthony Leiserowitz: Well, it's not even the last mile, it's already in the street. It just needs to get from the street into the house, okay? We're just missing that last connection. Millions of people want to get involved, they just don't know where to turn.

Tristan Harris: Yeah. It also strikes me for those who want to get involved and do something, there's this feeling of learned helplessness, because even if you want to get involved, there's this background doubt that even if we all do the right thing, is it really enough? I got my Tesla, I got my sunroof, I got my whatever, I turned off the light bulbs and I'm eating a vegan diet. Is it actually enough? And even if everybody else does the same thing, is it enough? And I think that's actually one area where I think the tech companies can actually help because they can show us how our actions are linked together, sort of like when Wikipedia sends you that notice once a year, it says, "If everybody who saw this donated just \$5, we would end this fundraiser right now." It's like if everybody who saw this did exactly X and invited one other person into a sequence of steps, we actually know that we could address the climate crisis on time.

Tristan Harris: I think a lot of people doubt that that's even possible. And of course because it's a complex system, it's almost impossible to sort of say, if everybody just did X, then the solution is solved. But I do think that there's techniques like that that close the kind of hardware loop that our brains are not good at feeling confident about things that are so massive. It's a hyper object. It's beyond the scale of the human mind to consider. But this is where exactly where tech can kind of show us where collective action could make a difference.

Anthony Leiserowitz: Yeah, so look, this is absolutely and vitally important that you build in some kind of feedback mechanism that helps people understand that they're part of something bigger than themselves. That's like one of the core human drives, is that we actually don't want to be an isolated, lonely individual that only succeeds on our own. Most people want their lives to have meaning, right? You get this brief flicker candle, flicker of life in the grand scheme of things, what did it add up to? What was the value of your life? People want to know that they're contributing to something much bigger than themselves, and for many people, it's their family. But for many people, it's beyond that.

Anthony Leiserowitz: And so this is... I'll just use a very great historical example, we need what are called cathedral projects, okay? If you go back into medieval times, communities back in say medieval Europe would start these grand projects to build these glorious cathedrals to glorify and honor the divine. And they knew when they started these giant projects that they were never going to live to see the outcome. These were projects that were going to take 100-plus years to actually build, but they believed in the vision, and more importantly, they could see what they had done. I laid that set of stones right there as you're watching this building starting to emerge from nothing, okay? And you could take enormous pride as part of your community that you were helping to build this something that was going to outlive you and everyone in that community. It would be standing there for generations to come. That was true in the medieval period. I think we still are driven forward to those kinds of projects today.

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- Aza Raskin: There is such a rare opportunity because the entire world is experiencing this altogether, hence, we're all feeling this kind of solidarity altogether. And if the prime directive is know your audience, the entire world is feeling solidarity. This is the audience or the time to build something really great.
- Tristan Harris: Yeah. This is one of the very rare once in 100 year type occasions where the psychology of the world is ready for something. That's why I think having this conversation right now for Earth Day about what we can do for climate change, and to your point, Tony, a couple of years ago, I think it was five years ago, Facebook did take a unilateral action for all of humanity one time in terms of social signaling, and that was for when gay marriage passed in the United States. And they built this little... I think it was an intern. It was just one engineer who said, "Well, wouldn't it be cool if I made a little thing where with one click, you can set your profile photo to have a rainbow overlay to say, "I support love, basically, between people."
- Tristan Harris: Now, the interesting thing about that is that was just one intern and somehow that got through the decision making pipeline, and basically, as a result of that, if you checked your newsfeed that day, it was just photo after photo after photo after photo of rainbow profile photos of people basically expressing solidarity with this thing. Where the world, because the Supreme Court had ruled in that direction, the world had kind of moved in that direction, but Facebook kind of put its hands behind everyone else in the line and kind of nudged them all across the line.
- Tristan Harris: As an example, I'm someone who definitely supported gay marriage, but it wasn't something I was vocal about. There would be very few things that would cause me to post about it every day or write a big text post or posted an image about it, but by providing kind of a one-click social signaling mechanism, am I willing to sort of participate in that? Absolutely. And when I see the kind of inspiring flood of people's stories and everyone's posting, that's amazing. And that happened all around the world, all at the same time in a synchronous moment. You ask, well, would I have preferred Facebook to take an action like that then versus now to save basically civilization and life from extinction? I would also want them to take the action now with bold actions like that that take a point of view that say that life survival and the survival of consciousness itself is worth preserving. Anyway, there's so many things that they could be doing just like this.
- Anthony Leiserowitz: Yeah. Well, those are all wonderful examples of the power of social signaling, right? I mean, the fact is, and again, this is one of the great glories of social media, is that it allows people to find each other and form community that's beyond the bounds of space and time. You can suddenly find yourself united to and inspired by people all over the world who you didn't know, you didn't even know were within your own social circles believed that what you did until that event happened, right? So you can take your example of the support for freedom to marry or of the gay community. That was a revelation to many, many people. They didn't realize how many people they even knew, and let alone all the other people out there around the world who supported that. And that begins to create a totally different consciousness in the human mind, in the human psyche.

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- Tristan Harris: And I think there's something to say for how wise are the choices that are being put on life's menu in a Facebook newsfeed, because you can imagine a desire to act for the positive good, which resulted in Facebook just adding little fundraisers for micro climate projects in every area. But if none of those added up to the systemic change and you have a systemic environment that just incentivizes extraction in oil over the alternative, that's not enough. So imagine the difference between a newsfeed that's the acute climate actions newsfeed where it's like, "Donate 10 bucks to blah blah blah," or, "Change your light bulbs blah blah blah," versus a systemic action newsfeed that's like, "Join the environmental voting project," which is, per year point, environmental voter project is bidding a voting block, an issue voting block for pro-environmental policies to sort of aggregate political change.
- Tristan Harris: There could be a systemic actions newsfeed that have to do with things that would change the overall incentives and system dynamics for everyone as opposed to tiny things that make each of us feel good if I'm donating five bucks but don't add up to the systemic change. And this is where, again, that decision about what goes on the menu is in the designer at Facebook's hands. They are really choosing.
- Tristan Harris: One last project that I think was worth mentioning, LinkedIn is in an enormous position to make a huge amount of impact because much like with drawdown where we know the top 100 actions that would basically make the biggest difference on climate change, we know that, what is it? 76% of emissions come from the top 100 companies and business basically is generating so much of the emissions, not so much the individual behavior. Well, LinkedIn owns the reputation of essentially all of the world's business, and instead of saying, here's how much revenue they made and here's how many employees they have, they can say here's where they are on their drawdown to carbon neutral. And they could have the actions right there that they would need to take. Just like they have the progress bars that say, "Your profile is only 70% complete. Please fill in your graduate degree and the languages you speak," they could add the progress bar that says, "Here's the actions that," let's say, "this shoe company needs to make to go to being net positive for the environment. And they could do that for every category and help coordinate the mass transition of all of business to being a climate neutral thing using the exact same persuasive strategies that they already use for each of us as individuals.
- Tristan Harris: You just imagine the amount of power that any company has like that to take massive action. Google Maps could show 10-year sea level rise by default, visible across all products. Zillow could show you the flood scores for all places you could rent or buy homes to actually say, "Here's the climate risk," and get us to reframe where we want to live not just by how attractive the photos are, but essentially in terms of climate risk.
- Tristan Harris: So across the board, I just get inspired by how much tech could do if they weren't just thinking about rearranging the clickbait deck chairs in the Titanic, but actually genuinely asking how do we create the mass cathedral like powerful actions that the next generations will thank us for?

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- Aza Raskin: There's something that makes me think of is shifts in perspective really can change everything. I think I see that sort of strain in your work, Tony, another way of saying it's the Joan Didion line of, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live", and the follow up to that, therefore, is if we change the stories we tell ourselves, we change the way we live. Technology is like a pair of glasses that we put on that shifts our perspective of the world, and Tristan, you just gave a whole set of examples of the kinds of perspective shift of seeing the world differently through a different set of lenses that makes the things that are distant in time and space immediately proximal, feelable, touchable and real.
- Tristan Harris: Yeah. And then the coronavirus, that was one of the most inspiring things, was seeing the way that, I think her name is Sue, I can't remember her last name, but she posted on Twitter this animated GIF of how an exponential spreads, and then she has a replay of the same exponential spreading, but then instead of all the little dots lining up and turning red to get infected, she says, "Well, this one dot turns gray because," it has a little quote box that says, "This person stayed home, this person sheltered in place, this person stops blah blah blah." And it basically shows you how the exponential doesn't spread the same way.
- Tristan Harris: If our information environment stored it for what was effective at helping us see the invisible, in Aza's words, "making the invisible more visceral," how our long term actions for the long term good can be brought up into the mirror so that instead of the objects in mirror being further away than they are, they can be brought closer, the positive goods. And just see that as kind of like an optician making a correction to your glasses, giving you kind of a correction to your inner sort of identity and belief in civilizational survival glasses so you can actually see the good that we're collectively doing.
- Anthony Leiserowitz: So this is something that we've tried to incorporate in some of our own work. So among the other things that we do, not just the research, but also then public engagement based on that research. For the past decade, we've run a program called The Yale Climate Connections, and it's really that critical second word, connections, helping people connect the dots between the seemingly distant abstract problem, climate change, and our daily lives and our values. And we do that through telling stories. So this is a national radio program, so old school, but we also do it on social media, so we're not too old school, but it's a brand new 90-second story every day, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, that plays usually twice a day on about 550 radio stations across the country.
- Anthony Leiserowitz: What we do is we tell two different kinds of stories, first person narratives of individuals from every walk of life who are talking about how climate change is affecting them right here, right now, to help people understand that this is not distant in time and space. This is already harming Americans everywhere. You just need to know what that looks like and what it feels like to be impacted in that way. But even more importantly are the stories in the first person stories of people from every walk of life across the country who are rolling up their sleeves and taking action, who are saying, "I'm not going to stand on the sidelines and just watch the world burn. I want to do what I can to get involved and to try to make a difference in my domain or my sphere of influence."

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Anthony Leiserowitz: I got to just say, as somebody who's been working in this space for 30 years, I had no idea how much just unbelievably gritty, innovative, creative, just brilliant things people are doing all over the country, I mean, of every type, big company, small company, kids, grandparents, minority communities, people in rich communities, I mean, on and on and on, every kind of a diversity across the country, taking action to address this issue and to help solve it, and it's incredibly inspirational. It literally helps charging my batteries and keeps me going. But that's the kind of storytelling that I think social media platforms are also, again, incredibly powerfully set up to provide.

Anthony Leiserowitz: Let's just take two other social phenomenon that have happened in recent years, and I'm thinking of Black Lives Matter and the Me Too movement. Does anybody think that discrimination against minorities is something that only has happened in the past few years, or that sexual harassment and violence against women is some kind of new phenomenon? No, of course not. These go back generations, hundreds of years, but with a hashtag, suddenly there's a way for a community to be built where the stories can be shared, where experiences can be shared, and suddenly, so many people become exposed to and become aware of just how big these problems are in a way that they just never saw before because they didn't live in those communities, they didn't live in those bodies, they didn't live in those homes. That's the kind of power that social media also has.

Tristan Harris: You're making me think that just like on Facebook, you can post text, a post, or an image, or a video, or an event. What if you could post a systemic solution? And a systemic solution is something that you post that's something that can be replicated by others in their community that's actually a positive thing. It could be building a community garden. It could be buying solar panels for your entire community. It could be things like that that are sort of more systemic, because the point of your newsfeed of like, you've got this daily communication of a minute and a half of people that are taking action in ways that people would be surprised by because, again, it's not highlighted or visible. So when people are taking action, it's not like that reaches the top of the attentional stack on any radio, TV, news, social media, et cetera, but you can imagine systemic solutions being replicated and then getting to invite other people, almost like challenging them like the ice bucket challenge into, "Hey, will you do this systemic solution with me? Do you want to do this one or another one? Or you can click through and see the feed of inspiring things that people are doing."

Tristan Harris: I just think we have a dearth of imagination where there's so much that can be done, but we're so used to thinking inside of the existing frames about which clickbait do you post and how should we rank the click bait? It's not the right question. We need a deeper question of what will actually meet the solution? What solutions will meet the problems in their surface area and timelines? And what are the actions that are sufficient to have us all be able to thrive and have our grandchildren live on a planet that works.

Anthony Leiserowitz: So, let me give you a concrete example of a story because, again, the other power of social media is that it's not just broadcast to everybody, but it's broadcast to the specific audience that could best take advantage of that idea. So this is an older story, but there was a conservative mayor of Indianapolis. He had served in the

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first Gulf war. He was actually in Kuwait when Saddam Hussein set all the Kuwait oil fields on fire. So he literally lived through hell on earth, okay? Absolutely horrific landscape if you remember those video images, just giant plumes of burning oil all across the landscape. And he was so scarred by that experience. When he came back, he said, "I never want another American boy or a girl to have to go overseas to fight for oil."

Anthony Leiserowitz: And so you fast forward to when he became mayor of Indianapolis, he decided to convert his entire city's vehicle fleet to electric cars. He was one of the first adopters of electric cars, which he called the freedom fleet, not namby-pamby progressive liberal stuff. This is about a conservative saying, "This is about freedom. This is about energy independence. This is about not having to fight for oil anymore." That's an idea that of course has begun to spread across government. It's spreading across city governments, state governments, and for a while, even across the federal government. That's just an example of an innovation that when people are connected, when they hear those similar stories and learn about all the benefits that you get from that kind of behavior change, can suddenly scale very quickly.

Tristan Harris: Yeah. Imagine ballot initiatives that you can make viral in your own hometown. So you could say, "I want a freedom fleet," so when you're posting those systemic actions, you can say, "This is how we got that policy passed in our town or in our state," and then having those things spread more easily that are about the kind of changes that we need.

Anthony Leiserowitz: Exactly.

Tristan Harris: I think that's a great example.

Aza Raskin: Following up on that, there's the reason why gay marriage as a movement works well is because it turns out we all know someone that it would affect materially that is gay, that wants to get married. One of the most powerful things tech platforms could do is scale up the work that you're doing, Tony. And just like now Facebook lets you mark yourself, "I'm in a disaster, but mark myself as safe," imagine if Facebook and Twitter and TikTok all had sort of prompts that if you're in a climate related disaster, then you record a video saying, "I am safe and here's how my life was affected or what I'm doing about it," and then it goes to not the general public, but all the people in your network, especially those that are in places that are not immediately affected.

Tristan Harris: Yeah. So all the times that there's those crop failures in Iowa or there was a tornado in such and such that's like once in 100 year type thing and people don't even know about it because they don't have media, you log into Twitter or Facebook from one of those zip codes that's affected and it actually would actively invite you to share your personal story because then you're doing what we've done with all other movements, which is, it doesn't change by just public sentiment, it changes because we all know someone that has been personally affected. Because if I'm using abstract moral reasoning about gay marriage, I might believe, well, no, marriage is between a man and a woman. But if I'm using relational reasoning of like, well, how do I feel about my friend Joe and the person

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that he loves? I'm happy for him, I want that. And so it just changes the kind of framework of decision making in our moral reasoning as well.

Anthony Leiserowitz: So that brings us back to where we started. And look, we get very fixated on the shiny new object of social media, which isn't so shiny or new anymore, but the point is we tend to get fixated on the tech. And I'll just like to point out though that the tech itself is still operating on a... This is a terrible metaphor, I apologize, but it's still operating on the wetware of the human mind and psyche, okay? And the fact is, is that for all of the interventions we've come up, from writing all the way up to TikTok, if you could put those in the same sentence, that one of the most powerful forms of communication that humans have ever created is storytelling. It's what we did, it's what helped us survive from the very earliest days long before writing, right? It was the story that helped you survive because someone in your community could say, "Don't eat that berry over there. Someone in our community once ate one and they died."

Anthony Leiserowitz: You didn't need to experience it directly. You could experience the world vicariously through those stories and it would tell you what was safe and what wasn't. And then of course, building from there, giving our lives meaning and purpose and everything else that has turned into many of the drivers of human civilization itself. So yes, we have all these fancy new things and virtual reality and augmented reality and so on. It still comes down to how do you tell a good story, and especially if you can hear the story told in the voices in first person of the person, "I experienced this, I was harmed this way, or here's what I did to solve this big scary problem and now it's not so scary anymore because I'm doing it not just by myself, but I'm doing it collectively with the other people in my life and it's empowering," that's an incredibly viral kind of story and piece of content that people are just hungry, hungry for.

Aza Raskin: It strikes me. Some of the most hopeful things that I hear you say are, one, we all agree more than we actually think, and two, it's we're under the spell that we think we don't agree, and these sort of first person narratives, they are these narrative tools that we can have that's going to let us wake up and realize the political will needed to change our system.

Anthony Leiserowitz: That's right. So let's come back to COVID. You would look at the news right now and we see all these kind of conservative right protests, same exact kinds of worldview protest against climate change, by the way, saying, "Liberate our state," right? And you look at that coverage and you're like, "Oh, my God, this is like a sizable proportion of the country." It's not. It really isn't. We've actually asked Americans in the past couple of days, which would you prefer? To protect people's health, even if it means that the economy continues to decline, or protect the economy, even if it means some people get infected? And overwhelmingly, 84% of Americans by a five to one margin said that they would prefer to protect people's health over the economy." And that includes people who've just lost their job, who are looking for work, who are the most vulnerable in so many ways, and yet they understand that the first thing is your health, okay? That's always the first thing, you got to have your health.

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Episode 15: Changing our Climate of Denial

Anthony Leiserowitz: So again, this is where our media system, and it's not new to social media, television has been doing this forever too, right? If it bleeds, it leads. It tells us stories that really distort our perception of reality. And so how can these platforms be used to help properly calibrate our sense of reality?

Tristan Harris: I love that and I think it's a lesson that not to trust any media whose success is directly coupled with how much attention it gets from us, because that fundamentally makes you a reality distorter.

Tristan Harris: Tony, I want to be respectful of your time and it's been a real pleasure having you in this conversation. I really hope everyone in the tech industry takes these lessons to heart, follows your work at the Yale... what is it called? Yale-

Anthony Leiserowitz: The Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, and then our radio program and podcast is called Yale Climate Connections.

Tristan Harris: Awesome. Well, thank you so much for coming. It was an honor.

Anthony Leiserowitz: Oh, well, thank you. It was a great conversation.

Aza Raskin: Your Undivided Attention is produced by the Center for Humane Technology. Our executive producer is Dan Kedmey and our associate producers is Natalie Jones. Noor Al-Samarrai helped with the fact-checking. Original music and sound designed by Ryan and Hays Holladay, and a special thanks to the whole Center for Humane Technology team for making this podcast possible.

Tristan Harris: A very special thanks to the generous lead supporters of our work at the Center for Humane Technology, including the Omidyar Network, the Gerald Schwartz and Heather Reisman Foundation, the Patrick J. McGovern Foundation, Evolve Foundation, Craig Newmark Philanthropies and Knight Foundation, among many others. Huge thanks from all of us.