

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

Episode 16: When Attention Went on Sale

Tim Wu: So you have troll wars, you have fake news, you have sort of the race to the bottom, all at the early days of the invention of the business model.

Tristan Harris: That's Tim Wu, author of *The Attention Merchants*. It's a book about the invention of the attention economy when 19th century newspapers began the original race to the bottom of the brainstem and, yes, they circulated stories that were just as ridiculous as anything you'd find on today's social media.

Tim Wu: He wrote a six-part series about the Moon and what he'd found there, which surprising to our ears they had giant lakes, huge trees, and the great revelation, these man-bats that flew around and had promiscuous sex.

Aza Raskin: What's striking about Tim's research is not just that these stories keep cropping up in print, on the radio, on television, and now online, what's really striking is the rare moments when the race comes to a stop. There are moments when audiences wake up and say, "Enough."

Tim Wu: I think it usually stems from some shock to the system that is so outlandish that there actually tend to be mass movements. It's not that surprising given that what you have here is people's minds being fooled with, and I think when people suddenly realize that they've been fooled they become very upset.

Tristan Harris: With coronavirus we stand at just such a crossroads. Today on the show we'll see what happens when the public demands a change of course, and what happens when *The Attention Merchants* continue with business as usual, which is the theme of Tim's second book, *The Curse of Big-Ness*, about antitrust in the new gilded age. I'm Tristan Harris.

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

Tristan Harris: Starting with your book, *The Attention Merchants*, you essentially go through the history of the people who have commodified and learned how to find and acquire our attention. I think of it almost like oil drilling and mining. What can we learn going back, especially to the period of the penny press or yellow journalism, from them to today's issues with technology platforms?

Tim Wu: The book is slightly modeled, actually, after Upton Sinclair's *Oil*, in the sense that it takes attention as this commodity whose value is not very well understood. It's notable that oil, in its early manifestation, was not understood to be valuable, other than as a sort of health cure for certain diseases, and some people put it on their faces for cosmetic reasons. Similarly, I think we all agree attentions because pretty valuable. I trace the origins of that to the invention of the ad-supported newspaper, the penny press, in particular a man named Benjamin Sun*, in the 1830s, who had the idea, ingenuous in its time, now obvious to us, that he could sell his paper at a loss, penny, but make the money up by cultivating a much larger audience and reselling his audience. So, he was kind of the inventor of this idea you hear sometimes that the audience is the product.

Tim Wu: What's so interesting is that as soon as the New York Sun started to make money, as soon as he got the business model going, the one that we're so familiar with right now,

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gather a giant audience, resell it. As he started to attract competitors, and immediately the contest went down, in otherwise it went to the most lurid, the most outrageous. Now, I should say that one of Benjamin Sun's great innovations is that he did make the news interesting. Prior to him newspapers were expensive and excruciatingly boring. If you look at the old ones they reprint political speeches in their entirety. They have comings and goings of ships, just terrible stuff. So, he had things ... The first page of his first newspaper was all about a melancholy suicide, a man who killed himself because his father wanted to ship him off to Indonesia, but there was a woman he loved. Already you're interested.

Tim Wu: So, another newspaper was run by a man named Gordon Bennett, and his idea was death. I think in one issue there was 14 stories of either historical death, current death, it was all death. He, for example, pioneered the first in-person account of a murder victim, a prostitute who had been hacked to death with an ax and lit on fire. So, anyway, it went downhill. The Sun started realizing it was in competition, was losing subscribers. What did they do? They commissioned a famous scientist who had the world's largest telescope to exclusively reveal what he'd found with his discoveries, and he wrote a six-part series about the Moon and what he'd found there which, surprising to our ears, they had giant lakes, huge trees, and the great revelation, these man-bats that flew around and had promiscuous sex. So, you had the invention of many things right at the very beginning.

Aza Raskin: Is that where the meme, those flying monkeys from The Wizard of Oz came from?

Tim Wu: You know it could be. It could be. They look a little bit like that, at least the pictures. They also, Gordon Bennett, he had his other way of getting attention was to insult other newspaper editors, so he entered in these giant beef wars, he called them. It's actually a little bit like Bloomberg-Trump. He was like, "You're a fat, no-good, useless waste of humanity." So, they printed these battles with each other. That got people excited. Now, from there I think it even gets worse. You have efforts to interfere with politics. So, journalism just runs pretty far down pretty quickly based on this attention model. You don't have to be any great genius to see the implications for our times.

Tristan Harris: Right.

Tim Wu: We found this new thing, found a new business model and pretty soon the race went to the bottom.

Aza Raskin: This is sort of the first time, I think, we see that newspapers ... We think of them being in the truth business but actually they're in the attention business.

Tristan Harris: The point that you're bringing to is once one newspaper discovers this business model here's these other ones that are charging subscriptions. They can't do that anymore because one has just found a new magical price of a penny, ...

Tim Wu: Right.

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Tristan Harris: ... and then that creates this new race. I think that's kind of what you're pointing to about how we have to look at the race condition not just here's this new business model.

Tim Wu: No, that's exactly right. Another, I think, important story from newspaper and journalism is they do recover. There is this natural, or built in, or historic, examples of counter movements. People feel like things have gone too far. We got to do something about it. Journalists began to develop their own code of ethics in the early 20th century based on the idea that the 19th century had just been too full of abuses, and the idea of just printing random stories as the truth was dangerous. These basic rules of journalism ethics, which I think the most important are is you don't print rumors. You, obviously, don't print things that are completely false, and you check with the opposing side to see if they have any comment, or if they want to dispute what's being said, those three principles. Journalists are so used to it they don't even think about it, but they do it a lot. Generally speaking, the New York Times is not running stories about life on the Moon. By the way, I should say that story was never retracted.

Tristan Harris: Really?

Tim Wu: Yeah, it's still out there.

Tristan Harris: So, there's still, the aliens are still out there on the Moon.

Tim Wu: Yeah, maybe. That story was never retracted. In fact, it was decades before anyone thought it might not be true, because how are you going to figure it out? You don't have another telescope.

Tristan Harris: So, what I'm interested in is what causes that swing back, because here we are we're in this world where it's sort of just yellow journalism, anyone can print anything. We get the race to the bottom of the brainstem, conflict, everyone's yelling at everyone. Then, why do we suddenly develop journalistic ethics, because I think through the history of your documentation of different movements in The Attention Merchants from colonizing radio, to television, first we go too far into the commercialization process. The stakes were a lot higher than just we don't get as good of information as we used to. We actually get things like wars, or we get fascism, or we get these other bigger consequences. How do you see that?

Tim Wu: I'll talk about a very small version and then sort of a larger version. A small version is the famous quiz show, Scandals, from the 50s. In the 1950s, televised quiz shows were invented. The quiz shows themselves were so evocative because the underdog would come back and win in this dramatic fashion. The plots were incredible, exciting, you had the female plumber which was sort of shocking at the time, or the young African-American boy who was a math genius, or something like this, all these kind of interesting characters. But, it turned out that the whole thing was as rigged as professional wrestling. In fact, the winner was predetermined. People were forced to throw the shows, and they had all these elaborate rituals to verify that there wasn't cheating on the show, so it made it worse.

Tristan Harris: How interesting.

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Tim Wu: Yeah, they had like these kind of extensive rituals where the questions were pulled out of some secret box and locked in a safe, or something.

Tristan Harris: Right.

Tim Wu: But, actually the person who was going to win got the questions earlier. So, when they realized the whole thing was a hoax it had a, I think, profound shock and it created a big change in how people thought television should be conducted. Walter Lippmann wrote this famous column denouncing what television had become and calling for public media. The Kennedy Administration, when they came to power, made the creation of public broadcasting one of their priorities. The Ford Foundation got into it. So, there's a story where, basically, civil society took the initiative to try to transform television. I don't know if they fully succeeded but they did something.

Tim Wu: In fact, you see in this this cycle. There's always this moment of novelty and infatuation. People were infatuated with television. They loved it. During that period there's almost a blindness to some of the negative sides of these things. I think the harshness of that shock that it was all a big lie is many people think a big thing that led to the idea of public television, and a different business model, and a different code of ethics. It didn't clean up TV right away but many people feel it led to the movement towards public broadcasting. Let me add another example I think is important. So, the radio had a prolonged honeymoon where people thought it was going to cure all of our problems, change politics as we knew it. I'll paraphrase a quote, The President will no longer be this distant figure but, in fact, be in your very living room like your own father.

Tristan Harris: This is the beginning of the fireside chats and FDR.

Tim Wu: Yes, even before then they just thought it would be great and, yeah, the fireside chats. But, then you had the experience of the totalitarian regimes beginning to understand radio as what Goebbels called the spiritual weapon of fascism and totalitarianism. As a machine gun can mow down your opponents the radio can convince them. You were required by law to listen to the main broadcasts of the Nazi leaders, like required.

Tristan Harris: By German law.

Tim Wu: By German law and, in fact, on the ground they rounded people up and moved them into special rooms to listen. It was illegal to listen to foreign radio stations. Later that became punishable by death during the war.

Tristan Harris: Wow.

Tim Wu: So, they took attention pretty seriously. The sustained use of the radio for propaganda in the 30s and through the second World War I think really had a pretty profound effect on people's feeling that this was a panacea for all of society's wrongs. Instead it became this terrible weapon of war. I think that lessened, by the end of the war you start to see the government again, the FCC, saying, "We really need to be really careful about how radio is used." From that comes the Fairness Doctrine, sort of regulatory measures.

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Tristan Harris: Which was in when? When was the Fairness Doctrine?

Tim Wu: The Fairness Doctrine begins, it kind of begins in the 40s. The Fairness Doctrine suggested that broadcasters when they treated a subject of great controversy had to do so in a, I hesitate to use these words but fair and balanced way. They were forced to sort of confront it in some more neutral fashion. That's the old, sort of image of CBS and Walter Cronkite. That's sort of the Fairness Doctrine encapsulated. So, it was partially sort of an ethical duty. They also had a legal duty to allow people a response time if they'd been impugned on the radio. It made things like Rush Limbaugh impossible. We sort of just have this unrelenting, and frankly Fox News ... It tried to make media into this different kind of organ, and I think it was in reaction to this dangers of propaganda, dangers of disinformation, the idea that it could become a weapon that unites a whole population and drives them in directions that can be extraordinarily dangerous.

Tristan Harris: So, part of what we're getting at here is essentially pendulum swings back in power, so going too far in one direction, whether that was, Let's democratize radio and give it to everyone and then you created World War II and enabled Hitler, and then swinging back into journalism codes of ethics, a more public broadcasting, publicly interested radio system. There's a few other examples of these swing backs. You talk in your book, *The Attention Merchants*, about television, the emergence of advertising and then Zenith the TV producer having an interesting innovation to deal with the rise of advertising. Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

Tim Wu: Sure, I do. Now, onto Zenith, there was a pretty strong reaction to radio advertising when it was introduced. Radio at first there was an unofficial ban on advertising in the early days of radio. In fact, President Hoover, I guess he was then Secretary, Herbert Hoover gave a bunch of speeches. He was like, How could we possibly take this scientific marvel like radio and pollute it with a bunch of hot dog ads and shoe polish? It's like unthinkable, and people will never stand for the idea of being in their own living room and suddenly having advertiser inside their house. That's crazy. But, things changed. That's actually why at first you had sponsorships. It would be like-

Tristan Harris: As a route around the ban on advertising?

Tim Wu: Yeah, so you'd have like the Duracell Brass Band, or the Miller Eskimo Orchestra, or something like that. Eventually, radio ads became common, and television ads began, as well. One of the reactions was Zenith, which was the Apple of their day, I guess, innovative device maker headed by an eccentric genius, and they came up with their ad killer, which we now call the remote control. The early versions of it, it looked like a pistol.

Tristan Harris: Literally holding your remote control and pointing it at your TV ...

Tim Wu: And zap the-

Tim Wu: It zapped out the annoying, and that was their ad. Zap out that annoying advertising.

Tristan Harris: It's like the first Chrome extension ad blocker ...

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Tim Wu: It is.

Tristan Harris: ... except for your TV.

Tim Wu: Exactly. Now, it didn't quite fast forward, or something. I think it original form kind of just turned the volume off, I think. Pretty primitive the early ones, it didn't always work, but they got better, obviously, and they became the remote controls we know now. Of course, that led in different attentional directions because then people just started changing-

Aza Raskin: Change the channel.

Tim Wu: Changing things. It's one of those things where you think if you give people control that they're going to be able to sort of ... The idea was you sort of responsibly skip ads, or who knows what. Instead it led to people sort of-

Tristan Harris: Fragmenting their own attention and channel surfing.

Tim Wu: Yes, that's ... Channel surfing is the term.

Aza Raskin: Which actually it seems to be the general principle when you force the responsibility back on the user then the forces of attention are still pulling so you're not actually giving them a way out. It's sort of like fungibility of responsibility.

Tim Wu: History is full of high hopes for giving people responsibility over their own decisions and then sometimes not going exactly the way people might have hoped.

Tristan Harris: I think the thing you're pointing to, Aza, is just as we saw the rise of advertising permeate television instead of saying, Let's actually put some controls in the default infrastructure, suddenly we made it your responsibility, which was the remote control to zap the ads, and so much like some of the problems that are there today, like there's disinformation, there's polarization, there's these problems, but let's ask you the individual to be more responsible, and we're seeing, one, how good faith efforts to do that actually created secondary problems of sort of the channel surfing thing, and also that it's just insufficient, because only some people get the kind of personal responsibility tool aka the remote control, although that did become a standard later. I also want to give one other example for listeners which is Paris and the Invasion of attention in Paris with a certain history of posters.

Tim Wu: Yes, I think of the poster as kind of an antecedent to the screen, the invention of the poster was a big deal in the 19th century. It transformed the urban environment, these big, colorful, lithographic images were something new, and another one of these cycles. People were incredibly excited about them at the beginning, particularly in Paris where they were first disseminated. You have all these famous artists who started doing them for a while. Then gradually people, French people, Parisians, become disgusted and there's a movement that targets the poster as the source of all kinds of problems. It's a little bit like now. People can't concentrate. They're out of control. They link it to prostitution and lowered morals and all kinds of stuff. Eventually they enact laws which restrict where posters can be.

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Tim Wu: Those laws are still in place in Paris. If you look carefully you'll see they have special plaques that suggest posters can't be here. It may have something to do with why Paris remains such a beautiful city. You may not notice it but there's actually a limit on how much advertising there is in the city of Paris, and that was a public regulatory approach as opposed to like figure some way out not to look at them.

Tristan Harris: Because they could hand people a pair of glasses that you could individually have to put on that would filter out all the posters, but then that puts the responsibility on the individual, not that they had that technology in the day.

Tim Wu: Yeah. It does raise this question of, how much advertising do you need for the world to work?

Tristan Harris: Right.

Tim Wu: Right.

Tristan Harris: Facebook would argue you need quite a bit.

Tim Wu: You don't need none. It's helpful to learn about new stuff, but think of even 10 years ago when Facebook and Google had a lot less advertising. Was like the world so bad back then? Actually I think it was pretty good.

Tristan Harris: Overall what I hear as a theme in your work is almost a question of like zoning laws for what is in the commercial interests versus what has to be maintained in the public interest, in the same way that we do with drilling and National Parks. I'm reminded of E. O. Wilson, the sociobiologist, saying that like the best solution for how to deal with ecological crisis and the climate sort of situation is actually just to reserve ... I think his book is called *Half Earth*, that just half the earth is just off limits for ocean mining, fishing, drilling, et cetera. I think of kind of what your work is on the attention is very similar. It's like how much do we let commercial interests versus public interests. Where is that line? We're sitting here in New York City. There is a park every few blocks. We get to live in a world where there's a park every 100 blocks. How much different would New York feel if there wasn't children's playgrounds, or parks.

Tim Wu: It would feel like Kuala Lumpur which is sort of unrelentingly city, or other cities that you've been to where there's nothing like that. Frankly, I think it's worse. I think that's very perceptive reading of my book. I am very drawn to zoning laws. I am, I guess, less radical than some people who would perhaps want a total transcendence of advertising altogether or of commercial. There's parts of advertising I like, and even parts in commerce that I think are important to the human thriving. But, yes, I don't think we zone carefully at all. I don't think we make the hard decision of just saying, "Okay, no, this entire area is a park." Now I'm talking about our consciousness, or our private lives.

Tim Wu: So, one thing we've allowed, for example, is the home to be kind of invaded in ways that I think are damaging to things like family and familial relationships. We've allowed friendships to become a little over commodified, as well. I think people four years ago think, it's weird that you have, Oh, my friend went here and recommended this and they'll kind of commodification. I think it's a subtle thing, but I agree with you that it's

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important either for our representatives, or for ourself, to try and zone our lives. When we are buying or selling, or doing things that's a valid thing. I enjoy it as much as anyone, but to keep it in its place is, I think, important for a healthy society.

Tristan Harris: Well, if I think about the economic and attentional power of something like TV versus radio, and you could say, Oh, well they were intruding on the home space, so there's this sort of level of new intimacy that's been granted to that attentional landscape. We've kind of reached into a new area of life that we didn't reach into before, as we go from posters in Paris, to radio, to television. There's sort of an increase in the horizontal surface area we're able to reach people at, and then I think of a sort of vertical level where we're actually reaching more precisely, more legibly, into the psychographics, the demographics, the precise targeting, the depth of emotional resonance that I can get into. Can I actually reach directly into your fears and paranoia in the case of Cambridge Analytica.

Tristan Harris: I want to sort of map that as a trajectory, because essentially what I'd love to ask you about is what makes something like a Facebook, or a Google, not just kind of the next evolution of TV/radio as, Oh, it's just a bigger block of attention. There's something, I think, deeper, and more nuanced, and more scary about that kind of consolidated power. What would you say to that?

Tim Wu: Yes, in some ways we are now switching channels from The Attention Merchants to the Curse of Big-Ness. We are in a time where we've sort of accepted the unrestricted, unregulated mining of the human consciousness, the harvesting of human attention. We are the resource and I think it takes its toll. I think there's a particular concern that I have with the concentration of the power to do so in a smaller number of entities, one, or two, or three, monopolous, or oligopolous, or whatever word you want to do. That comes from my concern that the monopolization of attention markets historically has been a extremely potent and powerful source of both political power, and commercial power, that is hard to hold accountable and, essentially, vests a small number of actors with a great number of the powers of government, and these powers haven't been exercised fully.

Tim Wu: Obviously, we've had totalitarian regimes which seize that power, or the Soviet Union, and used it to every extent possible. But, we're building the mechanism for it when we allow the monopoly form to come to dominate attention markets. We're creating the infrastructure for control of the masses, and I think that should be a concern to anyone with a knowledge of the history, or a concern for Democratic governance.

Tristan Harris: People look at proposals saying, We have to break up the big tech companies in response to problems like misinformation, polarization, addiction, mental health, isolation. They say, "That's not going to solve the problem." Why should we do this break them up thing? But, you're pointing to a more dangerous different thing which is the pure consolidation of power into single entities creates this kind of temptation with the government to sort of want to be in bed with that power and to kind of commandeer it, or to be ...

Tim Wu: Right.

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Tristan Harris: ... in relationship to it. Why is the concentration of economic power just on its own, even if it was steel or railroads, linked to things like populism, extremism, or fascism?

Tim Wu: With the rise of concentrated power, and monopoly, across the economy, not just in tech, it also tends to lead to long-lasting inequality. The reason is that the monopoly and oligopoly forms tends to aggregate profit towards itself as opposed to spread it out. One of the things you saw in the 30s was a enormous suffering in the middle classes which created this appetite for stronger leaders who were going to finally lead the country back to where it needed to go. I don't think there's any doubt, not just in the United States, but around the world, you're seeing in this extraordinary rise of populous, and much of it is actually anchored in kind of an anti-monopoly spirit, or a sense of the wealthy are getting everything. It's very familiar from the 1930s.

Tim Wu: To give you a few examples, the German movement that led ultimately to the Third Reich was in many ways almost an anti-globalization protest, and the most interesting thing I think about someone like Hitler, and other leaders of the Third Reich, is they both catered to the populist anger, said they were going to sort of take on the global economy on their behalf but also made friends, and made friendly, with the great monopolous, so they managed this balancing act.

Tim Wu: I think you see it in our current times. Look at a country like Brazil where you have this rise to power of authoritarian government again after decades. Right now it's elected but it could get worse. A lot of that was premised on the idea that there's this huge economic crash. Brazil had given all too much to the monopolies, everything was about globalization. Again, the leadership is trying to do this thing where they both, weirdly, like promised the working classes a new destiny, a return to greatness, a National salvation. But, at the same time are also catering to, and gaining support from monopolies in terms of we'll keep the labor unions down. We'll create new markets for you to explore, and so forth. So, that's the pattern I think we need to look out for.

Tim Wu: This doesn't directly relate to the intentional economy except in the following form which is, I think, that the more monopolized the channels of communication are the easier it is to access attention and control it, the greater the possibilities freezing those channels, as well, for having a media, or social media, that is friendly to government become compounded. That's the kind of thing I'm worried about. When you hear about Warren wants to break up big tech, or people that want to prevent big tech from just having too much power, I think we have to think about the political concerns and not just the nitty-gritty of, What would that do for competition, and would that really help or make things better? It's this sort of more macro concern about concentrated power as an evil in and of itself as a historic danger that we're talking about.

Tristan Harris: It's almost like antitrust should be renamed anti-inequality, or anti-populism, or anti-fascism, because, essentially, the concern about concentrated power is not even about the content of what the technology is doing, although there's a relationship there we can get into, but more just the way that that poses dangers for geopolitical risk, World War III-type scenarios. I'm not trying to fan the flames of fear, but just that we've seen patterns that create those kinds of risks in the past.

Tim Wu: Right.

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Tristan Harris: I think it's ... Antitrust, and big tech, and all of that sounds like kind of a boring policy conversation. I often think just per the kind of Frank Lutz sort of view of the world of language don't call it an estate tax, call it a death tax, because then people get riled up about it. Let's not call it antitrust, let's call it a anti-fascist sort of move. How do we prevent these things in consolidated forms of power from getting too dangerous?

Tim Wu: Yes, I think that's right. I think the highest and best calling of anti-trust ... It's an old word and probably a better one would be anti-monopoly or private-power control, something like that. In some ways tech might ... People are aware of tech. It's right in their faces. It seems to have a lot of power. I don't deny that. But, some of the other industries can be just as bad, Pharma, broadband. Why do we accept a broadband monopoly. I think broadband does more to, broadband and cell phones, which are both concentrated, do more to take money from the middle classes than ... You think about the fact that bills are double or triple what they are in other parts of the world and you think ...

Tim Wu: That in its way is a form of private taxation, just allowing this huge part of the household budget to be hollowed out by broadband. You need broadband to kind of be a citizen that is able to be productive, and you need a cell phone, as well, and we've let those things become this massive part of the household budget, and they don't need to be at those prices. The margins are absurd, as anybody who takes a careful look knows.

Aza Raskin: I want to be careful with this next thought, but as you were talking about the way that monopolies sort of cozy up to government it did make me, once again, return to thinking about Facebook and their policy which is to say, "We will fact check your advertisements unless you're part of the government. If you're a politician it's all fair game."

Tim Wu: I have been a critic of Facebook's advertising policy, and the worst version of it, the most terrifying version, is that at the margins they see doing this as a way to stay in the good graces of government, particularly the current government. There's a lot of other reasons, though, we don't want it, but they've never explained why they're in this game at all. I mean, this is one of the questions.

Tristan Harris: Say more about that.

Tim Wu: Well, one question, so Facebook runs political advertising and, as you said, allows it to be maliciously false so long as it's political advertising. If it's nonpolitical, if it's like a pill that promises to make you lose 100 pounds they won't run that unless you can back it up, but they will let you run something that says, "Joe Biden paid Ukraine a billion dollars not to prosecute his son," or something like that, some straight-out lie, as long as it's political. The worst version of it is the concern that, Well, the Federal government has a lot of ways of hurting Facebook. Facebook wants to get along with them, and on the margins they're like, "Nah, maybe we should just keep running these political ads," because they could get out of the business of political ads altogether. That's what Twitter's done.

Tristan Harris: And Pinterest and ...

Tim Wu: Microsoft.

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Tristan Harris: ... Microsoft and LinkedIn and a whole set of the companies.

Tim Wu: Yeah.

Aza Raskin: In fact, one of the ways they defend themselves is by saying, "Well, we're not doing this for the money because look it makes such a tiny sliver of money compared to the rest of our revenue."

Tim Wu: Which I believe. I do believe that. Some people might be more skeptical, but I believe that.

Aza Raskin: Rather it's saying from there, then it's not going to hurt them much to turn it off.

Tim Wu: Right, exactly. But, there's some people who are skeptical, Oh, they really want the money, but I don't think that's right. I think it is at the margin, you have this kind of thing in yourself it's like, Well, maybe why make an extra enemy? Why not keep a friend?

Tristan Harris: That friend being the Executive Branch?

Tim Wu: Being the Executive Branch, being this particular White House, which relies on, like no other White House before it, on defamatory and deliberately malicious lies in its advertising. That is, for some reason, their go to and so not banning their favorite form of advertising. More generally, the whole idea when you think about it, you have this one company and a bunch of people and their decisions about advertising rules can have such an effect on the Presidency that everybody cares about. They're just these little private rules, no oversight, no public involvement, has more effect than any legislation or anything else. It's pretty crazy, and scary. The idea, if it's possible that even they feel any pressure to keep running political ads I think is kind of outlines the cause for concern in a nutshell.

Tristan Harris: There was 250 Facebook employees who wrote the letter to Mark Zuckerberg saying that they disagreed with this ad policy, and so far Zuckerberg has not flipped his position, and they're continuing to go down the route of unchecked political advertising that's friendly to the current administration, which is in a way like them cozying up in kind of an indirect way. What would you say maybe to those employees who are, to maybe arm them up even better with an argument as to why this is so dangerous?

Tim Wu: I'd say more power to them. I would say that employee movements right now, in my view, are one of the most important forces in trying to inculcate effects in Silicon Valley, and I think they play a really important role. I think they are moving us towards this, I think, an important idea that tech be more like a profession with its own ethics and-

Tristan Harris: Which is what happened with journalism, as you said.

Tim Wu: Which happened with journalism, happened lawyering, doctor. I mean, the fact is that at the risk of stating the obvious, tech is incredibly powerful. It affects people's lives and is almost as much as the practice of law, or accounting, or prescribing drugs. Those are all bodies which, first of all, are regulated, but also they have their own ethical codes about

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what they will and won't do that are pretty important. The development of that is really, to me, one of the most important uplifting things I've seen in the last five years or so.

Tim Wu: Now, in terms of your question, how would I think to arm them with an argument, the big question ... They want them to be subject to the same fact checking. I think the idea of even running these ads puts them constantly in the game being subject to potential political manipulation, or even the appearance of such. Why do they always want ... If they really want to be out of this, which I believe at times. I don't believe that Facebook has a favorite for President, or if they do I don't think they're trying to do it, but if they want to be believed in that, if they want to credibly say, "We are a neutral platform," why be in this game at all?

Tim Wu: It hurts the argument that they credibly don't want to be choosing favorites when they get themselves into the game at all. They're always going to be pressured. If you put yourself in that there's no partway. If you're in the game you're going to be constantly subject to political pressure, and if they really don't want to spend all their time in Washington ... Even in some ways it can add up. If they don't want to be subject to potential regulatory regimens that are very negative that used as threats to try to get what people want out of them, then they should get out of this game.

Tristan Harris: We went through this swing in journalism from the kind of yellow journalism, race to the bottom of the brainstem, penny press, publish salacious lies that can get us into wars, and then it took us wars and seeing where all that went wrong to flip into this new ethical code of conduct, regulated and for the public good, the invention of even publicly-interested institutions, media institutions, public broadcast, public radio. If we're talking about that with technology today, how do we get to kind of a publicly-interested internet again?

Tristan Harris: If you think about Facebook as a new and unprecedented level of consolidated attentional power, because attention in this case is it controls identity, our self-concept, how we look and appear to other people, our levels and degrees of social validation, the basic needs of communication, how we catch up and know what our friends' lives are like, our political world, our election world, our public sphere. I mean, it is controlling children's development with things like Instagram which, basically, own all the hours of teenagers spending time during high school. When you own that many degrees of society, you've essentially like sold all of your public parks where kids grow up in to a private entity. So, now Verizon's all running the parks. How do we create this new balance where we kind of ... If we learn the lessons of what created a publicly-interested journalism, or a publicly-interested media, I feel like we need a publicly-interested and humane internet again.

Tim Wu: It sound like we need something like the Center for Humane Technology, right?

Tristan Harris: I might be tooting my horn.

Tim Wu: I believe very strongly that it is time for a new generation of tech tools that start from a very different place. This is partially your mission, but I'll just voice it. Why don't we have social media which has as its only goal trying to connect people in helpful ways. It's only goal. It's not also trying to resell you to advertising. It's not also trying to get you stuck on for as long as possible, but it really is working just for you, to try to improve

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your relationships with the people who matter to you. Often people say, "Oh, you know, don't go to a stock broker who works on commission. They'll just try and sell you a bunch of stuff. Go with someone who you pay who they try to figure out what actually is good for you."

Tim Wu: That kind of thing in social media, either a paid model, or a public model like the PBS, or NPR, where they just start from a different position and where they're maximizing different stuff. It seems to me really urgently needed in our time. That's where it all starts from. That comes from ... Social media is kind of obvious target. I also think our tools could be better designed to serve us, whether it's browsers, our phones, you name it. I'm suspicious of anything that has two masters, that has like some kind of other goal. It's just like that stockbroker is really-

Tristan Harris: Are they looking out for your interests or are they looking out for their own, ...

Tim Wu: Yeah, exactly.

Tristan Harris: ... when their business model is to look out for their own.

Tim Wu: Yeah, and I think we're kind of contaminated with tools that aren't properly serving us.

Aza Raskin: That have ulterior motives.

Tim Wu: Can you imagine if ... They have ulterior motives. Imagine if you had a chainsaw that like chopped down trees but also had like little screen on the side to have you watch some ads. You wouldn't want that thing. You'd chop your leg off. We've kind of accepted that for all kinds of tools that we use, and I just think it's like that is the next frontier. I've been waiting and hoping ... I don't know who it could be, whether PBS does it, a lot of billionaires with a lot of things they want to do with their lives to improve the earth. It could be company ... I don't know, choose Apple because they consider themselves more privacy protective, they could start a low-cost social network. I don't know who it could be but we need something, we need more generation of tools, we need more resources devoted to this cause. I think it's urgent, frankly, not just for the future of tech but the future of humanity and civilization. That's my call, and I know it's your call, too, to the next generation of tech people.

Tristan Harris: You know, in terms of how we would actually get there, we'd like to just leave people with, what would be a story between now and let's say two years from now where we did it? The States regulated in such and such a way. We broke up these companies and, specifically, split up Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram. However you would do it, because I think the way this also has happened in history, with IBM, with AT&T, with Microsoft, how these trials were in some cases the remedy in and of themselves ...

Tim Wu: Right.

Tristan Harris: ... and led to ... If you think about the choke-hold Microsoft had on being able to prevent the internet from flourishing with Internet Explore 6, and then letting that go led to the creation of Google, and this sort of flourishing of the internet. I think telling that story, how would we do it in the next two years to give people that optimistic vision?

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Tim Wu: Give me five years. So, I think it's a number of things. So, one thing is ... As you know, there's antitrust investigations ongoing of all the major tech platforms. Maybe it starts to be realized that as much as many people sort of enjoyed these buyouts that allowing them to buy all their competitors, particularly Facebook and Google, maybe wasn't so good for the health of the tech ecosystem that, in fact, they just sort of eat the whole ecosystem. There's so many projects that really never got where they could have been because they kind of got bought out and destroyed, or bought out and nullified. Through the lawsuits that seek the disgorgement of some of the acquired properties we sort of revitalized the Silicon Valley ecosystem in the first place to make it possible to compete in some of these areas that have long thought been sort of off limits for competition. So, that's one set of things that happened.

Tim Wu: Another set of things may be Federal government or States start passing stronger anti-surveillance laws, maybe motivated by the sense that the news media has gotten out of control with its direct marketing to people and feel that really this inculcate ... We look back maybe at some of the elections during the Trump Administration and say like, How did we let so much bad news get to so many people through targeted advertising, and why do we let people know so much about each other? So, you have a new sort of generation of anti-surveillance laws that make targeted advertising less attractive as a business model. We sort of wonder, Well, why did we think that was such a great thing anyway. People can look by themselves. They don't need stuff following you around. It didn't really seem to be that great. Even as an advertising model it actually just had terrible journalistic and media consequences by giving people more of what they want in terms of news, and it wasn't even that good for selling products, so that goes out of fashion.

Tim Wu: In that space you have the rise of models that are either subscription-based or truly free, not advertising-based, based on the public media, and that kind of shakes things up, and people all feel a little less angry all the time, a little less frantic, a little less driven by this sense that we're in this end-of-time's war, and maybe we mellow out a little bit more and return to this idea that small is beautiful, and that tech becomes kind of fun again. I mean, I was someone who grew up in the tech industry and there was a time people wanted to invent cool tools that made people's lives better, not like little gimmicks to make you click on stuff. Some of tech is still doing it, but a lot of people in tech are like, What am I building here? This isn't really what I signed up for.

Tim Wu: I think tech itself kind of goes back to building gadgets and stuff that make people's lives better. It's never completely disappeared, but it's kind of become a side business with advertising as sort of the center and logistics of the center, and we look back at this decade, I think, in five years and go like, Wow, we really let things go too far in the 2010s. Let's go back to what an early spirit was. That is my hope for the next five years.

Aza Raskin: We banned the trade of human organs and, obviously, human slaves. It's not so radical to think of banning the trade of human behavior when you think about the business model being not just the selling of our attention, but the selling of the change to our behaviors, beliefs, and biases.

Tim Wu: I agree, and those who write the history, people like me, will look back and talk about how the Center For Humane Technology had this critical period and others rose up and sort of called out what was going on. When I read the history, there is this important

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role played by people like yourselves who sound the alarm. There's many examples, frankly, of advocates and concerned citizens who say, "You know, something is going on here that isn't quite right." Even if the movement doesn't completely succeed, even marginal small changes that turn into something big can be really important. I'm inspired sometimes by like the health food movement where in the 80s and 70s it seemed like you were fighting a losing war.

Tristan Harris: Right.

Tim Wu: Who cares about trans fats, or all this complicated, people just want their burgers, fries, you know get lost. Look at it now, it's like completely transformed things. So, as they say, big things have small beginnings.

Tristan Harris: Thank you so much, Tim, for joining us and everyone should read your books, *The Curse of Big-Ness*, and *The Attention Merchants*, for more.

Tim Wu: Thank you. Thanks for having me on.

Tristan Harris: So, imagine it's five years from now, how did we make this transition to a kind of public and humane internet? States started to pass laws. We publicly woke up from a period of a kind of equivalent to the yellow journalism, or yellow social media, period that almost caused various wars due to disinformation threats. We created a new culture of responsibility, a new code of ethics for software engineers based on this tragedy.

Aza Raskin: The kids coming out of college no longer work at ... They just refuse to work at the companies that are involved with this kind of economics.

Tristan Harris: Now, universities across the country, and across the world, had ethics and computer science programs baked into the education and not allowing you to graduate until you had become certified as actually a practitioner of this, and we had regulation that actually reflected the need to protect the bounded, non-manipulated spaces of our attentional lives. The ending of his book, *The Attention Merchants*, Tim has an epilogue called, The temenos, which is the name for the sacred precinct, a part of our lives that is sacred. I just love this frame because it's the notion that there's a part of our lives that we don't allow to be commercialized by the profane. How do we retain those places that we call safe and sacred? Tim often talks about his work as this is kind of a human reclamation project. How do we reclaim this space for more publicly-interested and socially-interested world of both economics, and politics and, obviously, technology?

Aza Raskin: You know, a kind of thing where that's already happening is the social media blackouts before elections. Right now it's advertising before elections, but you could imagine all of social media gets turned off, and it becomes that sacred space where you get to re-engage with the people around you. I don't think it would be hard to say, "All right, we should have more time off," but come on look at the realities of the world. Where are you going to find that time, but it's one of those like, Where are you anchoring against? Imagine a world which didn't have any weekends, and just really imagine what that would feel like, you're working all the time. There is no moment where you get to do nothing together with your family and your friends.

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Tristan Harris: And that was normal.

Aza Raskin: And that was normal. How hard it would then be to, how ridiculous it would feel to try to add two days a week, imagine, where you didn't do anything. Imagine the effect to GDP. It would be terrible, but because we have weekends as a humane technology we accept them and are super grateful for them. It wouldn't be inconceivable to start to add more of those kinds of things as a technology to our lives.

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

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* Correction: Tim referred to the founder of the New York Sun newspaper as 'Benjamin Sun;' his name is actually 'Benjamin Day'.