

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

Bonus: #StopHateForProfit

Tristan Harris: Hey there listeners, we're taking a break from our usual interviews to give you an update on our movement. You may have heard about the recent advertisers boycott of social media this month. It's called stop hate for profit, and more than 500 companies have joined the campaign so far, including huge brands like Unilever, Coca-Cola, Starbucks, McDonald's, Honda. The campaign has been driven by the NAACP, Color of Change and the Anti-Defamation League. Why is this campaign happening now? Well, I think we've given you ample evidence on this podcast of how hate has a home field advantage in social media, per the recent Wall Street Journal expose, 64% of the extremist groups that were joined on Facebook were due to Facebook's own recommendation algorithms. We know that Boogaloo boys groups, which refer to Civil War II were recommended by Facebook, and actually led to a federal officer being killed in Oakland, California.

Tristan Harris: I think why this campaign is happening now is that people are fed up. They know that there's a problem. Many people can't quite put their finger on it, but they have seen so much damage and polarization and outrage, and this is true across the board in social media. We've seen how YouTube, some of the top verbs that are listed in the titles on videos are dismantles, debunked, snaps, realizes, screams, obliterates, shreds, defies, owns, confronts, insults, this is the background radiation of hate that wins in the attention economy. The Center for Humane Technology is also advising the campaign and you can add your own name to their petition at stophateforprofit.org.

Tristan Harris: So what's the significance of this development? Could this boycott actually lead to meaningful change? Well, soon after the campaign launched on Friday the 26th of June, Facebook stock dropped by more than 8% and lost \$55 billion in shareholder value. This had meaningful change in getting advertisers on the phone. Now, obviously Facebook stock climbed back up to its all-time high just a week later. Still nothing has actually moved the needle as much as this boycott has. We shouldn't have to resort to using the moral compass of a few advertisers and corporations to force Facebook's hand into doing more good faster to reverse some of these problems. But that's unfortunately the situation we've been in.

Tristan Harris: Regulation ironically takes years to pass, so what's interesting about this development is how quickly you can move when you can get the moral compass of advertisers aligned behind a direction and say definitively that Facebook has not done enough in the ways that its platform intrinsically creates these problems. So would this lead to significant change? Well, judging by Facebook's own words, no, not at all. Nick Clegg Facebook's VP of global affairs wrote an op ed "platforms like Facebook hold up a mirror to society". Well, if you listen to literally any episode of this podcast, you'll understand why that's absolute nonsense.

Tristan Harris: Mark Zuckerberg for his part reportedly told his own employees last week that, "My guess is that all these advertisers will be back on the platform soon enough." Facebook has more than 8 million advertisers on its platform and no one or two or even 10 advertisers make up even 1% of Facebook's \$70 billion a year in advertising revenue. There's no 80-20 rule where just a small number of advertisers make up a large fraction of the revenue because there's just millions and millions of long tail businesses and individuals and political campaigns that are all advertising on Facebook at the same time. This means that it's hard for a boycott to have a financial impact on Facebook's bottom line.

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Tristan Harris: That said, what matters here isn't the financial impact as much as changing the public conversation, that what is happening right now with Facebook and the amount of polarization and divisive and outrage evocation of our societies is not okay. This demonstrates why regulation and policy are so important. Zuckerberg's primary orientation over and over again seems to be to ensure that Facebook does not get regulated. Supposedly the reason why Facebook has taken such Laissez-faire stance on all these issues is due to the centrality of one person, Joel Kaplan, who sits at the top of Facebook's public policy arm.

Tristan Harris: As I understand it, there are many teams within Facebook who are working on integrity efforts, efforts to catch more hate speech, to catch the Boogaloo boys, things like this, and that those efforts, some of them are getting blocked because ultimately the interests of Facebook's government relations teams takes priority over the interests of those who are working on the ground closest to the harms, and the people who are working hard on the integrity teams inside of Facebook and Twitter and YouTube are closest to some of those harms because they run the queries that say, "Well, how bad is hate or racist speech in these different jurisdictions or zip codes or countries on daily basis?" Knowing what those harms are, they are the ones who are devising solutions that they think will help.

Tristan Harris: But if they don't have the power to enact those better policies because they're overruled by the government relations team, because they don't want to be regulated, we're never going to solve these problems. I think it's instructive that Facebook's own civic integrity team, as I've understood it, is actually funded by the antitrust budget, the part of the company whose budget is so that the company doesn't get broken up.

Tristan Harris: Now, one of the interesting things here has to do with organizational structure and chain of command. In Twitter's case, the civic integrity teams responsible for fact checking political kinds of speech actually have more power than the public policy team. There's a great article called inside Twitter's decision to fact check Trump's tweets. Within Twitter, the team's responsible for trust and safety had the first authority to flag his tweet and it was flagged first as needing a warning label, and then it was only after that that it went to Twitter's VP of global public policy and its top liaison to government. In other words, with Twitter, the system is set up that way to keep enforcement decisions independent from the teams responsible for PR and government relations.

Tristan Harris: In contrast, Facebook routes critical policy decisions through their policy chief, Joel Kaplan, who's also the company's main man in Washington, an arrangement that its former chief security officer recently criticized, that's Alex Stamos. In other words, how do we make sure that there's a clean divide between the separation of church and state inside of an organization, which mirrors the same thing that we had to do in journalism? You would never want the New York Times to withhold a news story that was critical of let's say one of its advertisers, because it was critical of one of its advertisers. You would want the editorial team to simply say what was true independent of whether it would harm their revenue.

Tristan Harris: Well, in this case, Facebook is beholden to the whims of their government relations team, which are equivalent to a newspapers advertising department. Integrity teams, which are the equivalent of its editorial teams are unable to make decisions that go against the values of the governments in which they operate. Again, this is so that

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Facebook can avoid being regulated. So one of the things that we need here is for companies like Facebook and Twitter to simply enforce the existing policies that they have and not give exceptions to the loudest and most powerful voices on their platforms. The advertisers that are involved in this boycott are still a long way from doing lasting damage to Facebook's bottom line.

Tristan Harris: But nonetheless, this could be a turning point because a lot of pressure is actually now being applied. For the first time Mark and Sheryl have had to be on the phone to figure out what they can do to bring those advertisers back. It's certainly moving the public's perception that there really is a problem here. Of course, the real problem is with their business model, and advertisers can't criticize that because they also depend on it. Even pulling their spend off of Facebook, where else can they put their advertising spend? One of the monopoly and antitrust issues here is that there isn't another place where you can actually reach your customers, and in a post-COVID era, an argument that Facebook might make is that advertisers actually need Facebook to use their micro-targeting capacities to drive up demand and restart the economy.

Tristan Harris: So that's one of the problems here is that Facebook has become entangled with the actual economy itself. Small and medium-sized businesses use Facebook to reach their customers. So there's much more to say here, but we just wanted to express our support for the overall movement in this direction, and that so much more needs to be done, especially going into this next election. But one thing we'd like to tell the journalists and those who are covering these topics is let's not be surprised when we find that there's yet another Facebook extremist group recommending a civil war or killing people in the streets or inciting racist violence. That would be kind of like writing news story headlines about, oh, we found a little bit more CO2 coming out of this Exxon factory or we count a little bit more ethane coming out of this Chevron facility.

Tristan Harris: In the same way, we shouldn't be surprised to see more outrage or polarization or addiction coming out of technology companies because that's the DNA of their operation. That's why in the long run, we're going to need something much bigger than stock paper profit and go off to the business model itself.