

## Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

### Episode 23: When Media Was for You and Me

[Video Clip]: Now friends, I'm just an average American. But I'm an American, American, and some of the things I see in this country of ours make my blood boil.

Tristan Harris: That's a clip from the film called Don't Be a Sucker, produced by the US Department of Defense during World War II. It's propaganda of course, but propaganda designed to inoculate the public against fascism.

[Video Clip]: Now you know them. You know what they stand for, and it's up to you and me that fight them.

Tristan Harris: So, what is the democratic response to a voice like this?

[Video Clip]: Fight them and destroy them before they destroy us.

Tristan Harris: In the case of this film, the democratic response to a fictional fascist comes quietly. Almost as sigh.

[Video Clip]: I've heard this kind of talk before, but I'd never expected to hear it in America.

Tristan Harris: Two spectators walk away from the crowd and sit down on a park bench.

[Video Clip]: Do you believe in that kind of talk?

[Video Clip]: I don't know. It's pretty good sense to me.

Tristan Harris: There's no narration, just a respectful conversation.

[Video Clip]: What about you? You are an American, right?

[Video Clip]: I was born in Hungary, but now I'm an American citizen. And I have seen about this kind of talk and do.

Tristan Harris: A conversation that invites you to think of yourself as an individual.

[Video Clip]: You all belong to minority groups. I was born in Hungary. You are a Mason. These are minorities.

Tristan Harris: Even if you appear to be in the majority.

[Video Clip]: And then you belong to other minority groups, too. You are a farmer. You have blue eyes. You go to the Methodist Church. You have a right to belong to these minorities. It is a precious thing. You have a right to be what you are and say what you think, because here we have personal freedom.

Tristan Harris: And notice no music. Just birds chirping.

[Video Clip]: This is good hard common sense.

Tristan Harris: It's hard to remember in this age of perpetual anger and polarization, that media can also sound like this. The chirping birds. The calm voice, the gentle nudges to think for yourself. What you're hearing is a radical experiment in media. When disinformation

## Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

### Episode 23: When Media Was for You and Me

was considered a national emergency and government enlisted the leading thinkers of the period to craft a democratic response. But there's so much more that tech and government officials can learn from this neglected chapter of media history. Our guest on today's show studied reams of films, art exhibitions, and design ideas, reimagining how media could make us feel.

Fred Turner: I found a world that I literally didn't know existed. A world very much centered on designing media to help make democratic people.

Tristan Harris: That's Fred Turner, a communications professor at Stanford University.

Fred Turner: They develop environments that surround people with images. Above their heads, below their feet, on the walls. And in their minds, people can walk among these images. See the images that matter to them, expand their awareness of the world at large without losing their individuality.

Tristan Harris: Today on the show we ask Fred Turner author of *The Democratic Surround*, to explain how media can make us feel more reflective, more patient, more tolerant. In short, more democratic.

[Video Clip]: Let's forget about we and they. Let's think about us.

Tristan Harris: I'm Tristan Harris, and this is *Your Undivided Attention*.

Fred Turner: One of the things that really shocked me when I went back into the archives, was that I found four fascists listed in the press. So, three of them you'd think of right away. Hitler, Tojo, Mussolini. But I bet you wouldn't think of FDR, Franklin Roosevelt as the fourth fascist. I was shocked. He appeared in the magazines and was called the fourth fascist. Why? He had his famous fireside chats that he would do over the radio, and they would be beamed into American homes. And people were afraid that he, like Hitler or Tojo, was using the radio to sneak into people's houses and create a kind of false intimacy with them.

FDR: I should like to say a personal word to you.

Tristan Harris: He's right there in your living room next to the fireplace.

Fred Turner: He feels like your friend.

FDR: I seek to look beyond the doors of the white house. Beyond the officialdom of the national capital, into the hopes and fears of men and women in their homes.

Fred Turner: He feels like the person in your Facebook chat group. He feels like your friend. And because of that, he has an ability to impact what you think and what you feel akin to the kind of impact that your close friends might have.

Tristan Harris: Intimacy hacking.

## Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

### Episode 23: When Media Was for You and Me

- Fred Turner: Intimacy hacking. Exactly. And in service in Roosevelt's case of the national reconstruction administration. The effort to build a centralized American state. So people really feared that, and they feared that media had that power to get inside. To get behind. To sneak in, and to trigger emotions that you might otherwise have pretty good control over. Thanks to these new media technologies.
- Tristan Harris: There is a set of people, Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson. Who came along and started studying this and started looking at the psychological communications component.
- Fred Turner: Yep. Absolutely. So Margaret Mead was an anthropologist. Her husband, Gregory Bateson was an anthropologist. And they got together in 1940 with a group of 60 American intellectuals led by an art historian named Arthur Upham Pope and formed something called the Committee for National Morale. And this committee had enormous impact. They've been largely forgotten. But they're really important. They advised Roosevelt on media policy and propaganda policy. They wrote white papers. They wrote books. They were very, very influential. And what Mead and Bateson did was to say, "Okay, if we're going to go to World War II, if we're going to get in the war. We don't know it's World War II. We're going to enter this war, and we're going to want to resist the Germans. We've got to be able to do propaganda, to get our people excited about fighting the Germans. And this question that has a real bearing on our own time. Because what they had to produce in their own minds was American unity that was not at the same time an authoritarian style of unity.
- Tristan Harris: Here we are using the tools of propaganda domestically, which is unifying a kind of psyche that we're cultivating. A very specific psyche. An intentional psyche.
- Fred Turner: Oh, very much.
- Tristan Harris: And yet one that is in unison, democratic actually and plural and different and diverse.
- Fred Turner: Yeah. And that's the challenge, right? So, there are actually a couple of years at this moment. There's some folks in Roosevelt circle who say, "Look, we need to get ready for war. The Germans are super unified. They're doing the blitzkrieg." You might not like fascism, but that mass psychology of fascism pretty effective at unifying a militarized state. So some people in Roosevelt circles say, "Ah, we should be doing what Goebbels is doing. It's very effective. Don't worry about it. We'll deprogram..."
- Tristan Harris: Fight fire with fire.
- Fred Turner: "Fight fire with fire, and we'll figure it out later." And Mead and her crew are... The reason they're so important is that they come up with a different view. And they say, "No, no, no. That's actually really dangerous and really risky, and we shouldn't go down that road. What we need to do is find a kind of unity that is strong, but also individuated. Where you're you, I'm me, but we're in this together. And we need to find a kind of media that will promote that kind of unity." Now, Mead and Bateson took photographs, but the other people in the Committee for National Morale were all sort of social scientists. They wrote all the time, but they couldn't make media to save their lives. They got lucky.

## Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

### Episode 23: When Media Was for You and Me

Fred Turner: In 1937, a group of Bauhaus artists and refugees from Germany arrived in the United States. One in particular, Herbert Bayer, Walter Gropius, and others came to the United States. And they had in their own experience, developed a robust theory of environmental media that would in the Germany of the '20s and '30s, help Germans resist the pressures of industrial living, they thought. When they got to see-

Tristan Harris: This is when they were in Germany.

Fred Turner: When they're in Germany. Yes. So that's the '20s and '30s. They get to the US and they need work desperately. And what they start to do is repurpose the design techniques they developed to resist industrial life into techniques that can be designed to resist fascism. They develop multimedia, multi-image surround environments. I've ended up calling these democratic surrounds.

Tristan Harris: These are physical spaces.

Fred Turner: Oh, physical spaces. They're totally physical. I'll give you a concrete example. It's a really interesting one. It was an extremely successful propaganda exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, in 1942. It was called The Road to Victory. And it was designed by Herbert Bayer. Contained photographs laid out in a design that was established by the Bauhaus. Some very large, some very small. Some over your head, some at your feet. And this was at a time when most museum exhibitions just showed you, picture after picture at eye level. You sort of walked along and looked at a picture and then in the next picture. [snore] Okay. But he built this environmental media and people could walk through it as if on a road. And critics were astounded. People flocked to this thing. 80,000 people came in about eight weeks. It was just crazy-

Tristan Harris: It was a huge number of people at that time.

Fred Turner: Oh, yeah. And the museums-

Tristan Harris: Museums were actually a very big part of the cultural institutions at the time.

Fred Turner: Absolutely. But that's still a huge number of people. I mean, thousands and thousands. Tens of thousands of people are coming to the show. And when you read the reviews of the show from the time, what you see is that what people are excited about isn't just the pictures of America. The photographs, some of which are borrowed from the '30s. It's the sense of all being in this together, but on our own terms. People talk about being able to experience the unity of America as they move through it. One critic says, and I love this. This is the quote that really got my attention. "The exhibition does not mold people's minds because that's what fascists do. What it does is it gives you a mediated opportunity, an environment in which to practice being yourself with others. Making aesthetic choices. Making intellectual choices. Reasoning together about the future of your nation."

Fred Turner: Now, the images were of course carefully curated, and they were designed to produce an image of a world that today we might recognize as racist. As problematic, in many other ways, sexist. But that at the time, did make an effort to include the many different kinds of people who were in America. Native Americans, African Americans, white

## Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

### Episode 23: When Media Was for You and Me

Americans. And that vision, that vision of a world in which you could see yourself among others unlike you, and yet perceive yourself as collectively part of a larger mission to build a better world. And to resist massification, and to resist fascism. To resist bigotry of the antisemitic kind that was clearly driving fascism in Germany. That was a beautiful thing, and people responded to it.

Tristan Harris: Why does this matter? Why are we having this conversation obviously on a podcast that's about how technology is influencing society? Because essentially the smartphones, Facebook, newsfeeds, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, are the new democratic surrounds. But you could actually say, "Are they democratic?" They're the new polarizing surrounds. The outrage surrounds. The conspiracy surrounds. The paranoia surrounds. When I was at Google, actually, when I was studying the attention economy as design ethicist, the thing I was really concerned about is, what is an ethical, asymmetric, persuasive relationship?

Fred Turner: Oh. That's very interesting. What a nice phrase.

Tristan Harris: So, there you are and you have some kind of asymmetric capacity in which two billion people are going through your exhibit. Except in this case, the exhibit is your home screen or your notifications panel or your newsfeeds. When we have asymmetric power to shape people's thoughts and emotions and word choices, how do you do that? And your examples here are almost like design principles or thinking styles to say, "Okay, maybe a form of more democratic surrounds is, we control the menus of what kinds of faces and photographs people are exposed to in this museum exhibit. But there's some way that we're able to emphasize an individuated experience. In that Committee for National Morale, that they were trying to extract, what are the principles of a democratic propaganda?"

Fred Turner: I think it's exactly that. So, I want to separate your question into two parts.

Tristan Harris: Great.

Fred Turner: One part is about how you design an environment and the other is, how do you find an ethos that you can serve? Because the thing about the national morale folks, especially with Road to Victory, when it was established in '42. They have a clear understanding of what their mission is. They know what they believe characterizes a healthy democratic American society.

Tristan Harris: And the healthy democratic society is as informed by defining the democratic personality that they thought Americans should have.

Fred Turner: Yep.

Tristan Harris: So they define what that was, the democratic personality.

Fred Turner: Absolutely. Let's spend some time on what the democratic personality was, because I think that's really important.

Tristan Harris: It's foundational.

## Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

### Episode 23: When Media Was for You and Me

Fred Turner: Yeah. So Abraham Maslow, who I think many of your listeners will know, and talked about the pyramid of self-actualization. So back in the '40s, Maslow actually writes about the democratic personality and this is what he writes. He says, "The democratic person tends to respect other human beings in a very basic fashion as different from each other, rather than better or worse here. Here the stress is first of all on the fact that people are human beings and therefore unique and respect worthy." A couple of things to note about this. First, he's pushing back on a definition of personality promulgated by the fascists and available in the United States. So there's a book called *The Nazi Primer*, which was like the boy scout manual for Nazi youth. And it was translated in the US and published in '37, I believe.

Fred Turner: And the first line of that book is, "The foundation of the national socialist outlook on life is the difference of men." By which they mean, racial differences that they construe hierarchically. So they talk about Nordics and Dinarics and all these different types of head shapes. And what Maslow is saying is, "No. Our difference is the foundation of our unity." It is not the foundation of our dominance. It's the foundation of our sharing. It's the possibility. It creates the condition of possibility within which we can collaborate and be unified. And that's very interesting. So now they've selected that personality type. They know they're going to design to produce that. That's really the goal. They optimize for that in a couple of different ways. The first is if the celebration of difference is central to the democratic person, then you're going to give folks images unlike themselves.

Fred Turner: You're not going to only produce dominant imagery. So by way of example, I was teaching this morning about the Disney Corporation. And I showed people pictures of Cinderella, and Cinderella looks just like Belle. Who looks just like the woman in *Frozen* and on down the line. And my students were just boggled because all of these creatures are more or less blonde or sandy-haired, white. Curved in very particular nonhuman ways. And they could see in that imagery, a kind of oppressive mass culture. What Maslow and the folks at the Committee for National Morale and the Bauhaus designers were interested in, was not showing us many images of the same kind of dominant type, but rather many kinds of difference.

Fred Turner: So you would see much later in something called *The Family of Man* in 1955. The most widely seen photography exhibition of all time. There were 500 images of people of all colors. People of different sexual preferences. And that kind of diversity is key. So, showing people different images. Second thing that's key, not occupying all of a person's attention. It's so interesting. The people who designed these surrounds were very conscious of making sure that there was physical space between images, so that there was room for a person to recover themselves after engaging with the information, the picture or the data. And-

Tristan Harris: And losing yourself.

Fred Turner: Not losing yourself. Precisely.

Tristan Harris: Against the fascist mode, which was to lose yourself in the emotions.

Fred Turner: Right. And this is critical obviously for our own time, and I know you've worked on this for awhile. The losing of oneself in a symbolic environment created by another,

## Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

### Episode 23: When Media Was for You and Me

particularly another in power is the definition. The foundational condition of mass society. It's what makes people able to do crazy things together at scale. And so, that that's exactly what the democratic surround folks were against. They wanted to make sure you had time to recover. You could lose yourself for a moment, but always come back. Always come back, always be you. We want you to be you. What's more, as you come back, decide rationally. Is that an image I want in my life? Do I want to engage with that kind of idea, that kind of picture? Or do I want to move on to another?

Fred Turner: People put those together in their own way. So those are two really important principles. Let me also just say that this idea of not being totally absorbed in the media environment is contrary to other dominant aesthetics at the time. There are two really important ones, fascist and surrealist. Surrealists built environments designed to turn off your conscious and put you in touch with the unconscious. They were totally overwhelming. Walt Disney did it too. He's not a surrealist, but he did it too. He built 360 degree surround film spaces. And he knew they were working when everybody in the space swayed together as if they were on a carnival ride.

Tristan Harris: Reminds back when you're playing a video game and you move your whole body to contort to make the character move to the left or right as you're trying to do it.

Fred Turner: Oh, absolutely. Or it reminds me of what might become quickly possible. Distributed virtual reality. We all have headsets, but we're in different places. And we sway together according to some invisible music that only we see. Well, that's an essentially authoritarian style.

Tristan Harris: Let's actually push back against this because I think we know from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi work on flow that losing and being absorbed in an activity is actually one of the highest states of optimal psychological experience and wellbeing. When people say, "Surgeons losing themselves in the task of a surgery or a cook who's losing themselves in the task of slicing vegetables or..." You get the idea. I feel like in each of these cases, there's sort of a dialectic and we're saying, "Hey, there's this thing that looks the same in fascism and a democratic propaganda, but actually there's this other difference somewhere in there that distinguishes between the two." And that's, I think at the heart of what this conversation is about.

Fred Turner: And I the difference is agency. Mihaly is a really interesting case. He talks about people who have extraordinary agency in training. I think about this difference that we're describing as the difference between drowning and swimming. Drowning is a totally immersive experience. You think about nothing else. You may not be breathing, but you are fully, totally, every part of your body engaged in experiencing drowning. Swimming. You're also in the water, but you have agency. You have skills that have been trained into you. You're in charge of your relationship to the water. You move through it. And as you move through it, you develop a rhythm in your own agency, in your own body driven from within in service to a mission that you value.

Tristan Harris: Right. So just to translate back to something like the cooking example, like there you are slicing carrots. And it's not as if you lose yourself slicing those carrots, there's still agency happening. As opposed to, there you are in the Facebook news feed, you're scrolling or something like that. Agency isn't really happening in that same way. And I'm trying to tease apart these concepts for-

## Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

### Episode 23: When Media Was for You and Me

Fred Turner: No, agency isn't really happening in that same way. And it's tricky, right? Because think about a concert musician, an orchestra performer is performing in terms of a score set by Bach hundreds of years ago. You might turn over your agency in ways that are pleasurable and arguably super important. It's really a question of who do you want to serve? We've built a world in which lots of very smart people have commercial incentives. Moral and value incentives to build systems that submerge and immerse, and that keep people underwater for long periods of time. And I think there's another piece that you mentioned earlier that I want to pick up as really important.

Fred Turner: The designers of the '40s and '50s who I've spent so much time looking at, were building spaces with many hundreds of images inside them, through which people would walk in their body. And you control your movement, and you can look up. You can look down and there're images to see. Later in Moscow in 1959, we have a massive national propaganda exhibition there. Giant Buckminster Fuller dome, 200 feet across. Seven screen images above flickering with different pictures of America. These environments were designed to show people the possibilities in America. The diversity in America. The flexibility in America, and not to immerse them. What's distinct about all of these places though, is that they are places. And I think what's new about our time is that when we have phones in our pockets. Screens on our desks, screens on our wall. Screens on the back of our airplane chair, screens on the backs of our car chairs.

Tristan Harris: Screens to wake up to and go to bed to.

Fred Turner: All the time. And I'm guessing that most of those screens are designed as if the encounter that the user is having with that screen is only in that moment and for that screen. We start to get this kind of accumulated confusion. We slide in and out of immersion all the time. And the whole world starts to be a bit like a surround.

Tristan Harris: Right.

Fred Turner: And our agency is in question. And then the ground starts to slide out from under our feet.

Tristan Harris: So, we know there's all these problems with technology and social platforms in the big five, et cetera now. But we're asking like, "Okay, well, if we had the good version, what would it look like?" And I think the questions asked in the 1940s by this group are essentially what we're asking here.

Fred Turner: Yeah. And I think they're really important. I think another thing that the good variety would have is built in structures for collisions with difference. One of the things that things like newspapers had and still have is they force you to have collisions with difference. You see stories you didn't mean to look up. You see kinds of people you didn't mean to know about. Now, in a good way, this is already happening. If you've got a Netflix feed, it might have a variety kinds of stories. It might have criminal stories. It might have RuPaul's Drag Race. You're going to see people who are different than you with interest different than yourself, until it begins to narrow down on your preferences. But this narrowing down on preferences makes it increasingly difficult for you to encounter things that you don't know you need to encounter.



## Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

### Episode 23: When Media Was for You and Me

Fred Turner: And a healthy city is one in which many different kinds of people live together and encounter one another. They bump into one another, they see one another. So we've actually got a couple of principles. One is disruption. Make space for people to feel like themselves. Another is collision. Make space where people encounter those who are different than another, in a way that often encourages them to collaborate. The third I'm going to-

Tristan Harris: Right. Not difference in terms of say, outrage. Because for example-

Fred Turner: Not at all. Not at all.

Tristan Harris: You can imagine a horrible design of a digital city, in which when you encounter another, who is different, we pick the least attractive part of that person or something they said that was the worst part of them, and made that primary or the most privileged thing that you were to see upon first glance. That would be like the most dystopian version.

Fred Turner: The third thing I would want to add is the importance of civic infrastructure. This is really, really important. Eric Klinenberg, a sociologist in New York, wrote a book called Palaces for the People, in which he talks about social infrastructure. This is a version of that. And it's architecture, whether physical or digital, built in the civic interest. By which I mean, designed to serve all people. Not simply those who have access to the space, but actually all people, to recognize and help them with their needs, including those who are awkward. Not natural fits in the case of a library, which is Eric's example. People who are poor. People who are homeless. They all belong, and we serve them all. And we serve them all because we share the value of the civic good. I'm just picking on Facebook because it's easy. But one of my gripes with Facebook is that we have a rhetoric of connection. But it's a rhetoric of connection that's built entirely around self-selected friendship groups.

Tristan Harris: Right.

Fred Turner: We're all going to be friends. That's not a civic vision. That's a privatized vision.

Tristan Harris: Right.

Fred Turner: We need a civic vision. We need a vision that says, "We are all here and we're working toward our collective good."

Tristan Harris: Which strikes me then as a design constraint if you're building something like Facebook or a digital city or something. To the extent that there is some personalization, because, I mean, personalizing experiences can lead to many benefits that we should acknowledge. But a unilateral totalizing personalization eliminates the opportunity for collision for difference, for recognition of differences. Tolerance, egalitarianisms and some of the other values that I know the committee people look at.

Fred Turner: He was bumping into a historical problem that I think is deeply American. Both of us as people living in the 2020s now, are properly suspicious of centralized authority, of institutions and of those who would dominate our views. But some degree of

## Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

### Episode 23: When Media Was for You and Me

centralization is really, really important. And you think about a hospital, for example. A hospital as a place of centralized authority, bureaucracy. It's also the place I want my operation done. I don't want my operation done by a loosely assembled network of highly individual actors. Okay? I feel a little bit the same way about news. If you start to personalize news, distribute it. We used to fantasize that that would make everything more democratic. What in fact it does, is make it less democratic by virtue of its personalization. To become more democratic very perversely, you want Walter Cronkite delivering a fact based newscast. Now, might he exclude things? Absolutely. Might he repeat the stereotypes of the society that we all have it? Absolutely. But he will establish a shared factual basis for discussion. That's what we've got to have, is that shared factual basis.

Tristan Harris: And I think this is getting to... So, we have centralized models of media and communication whose benefits are that they're stabilizing forces. They're consistency forces. They can project values. Like we're going to show people many different things that they might not normally be exposed to. And everyone's going to have that shared context, that shared water cooler. That's the benefit of that. The failure modes of that are obviously then there's lots of other valuable voices that are not getting to speak. And so, the intellectual dark web or whoever it is that are your favorite, Black Lives Matter, Me Too Movement. These kinds of other things don't crop up because they might be suppressed by the centralized moral consensus.

Fred Turner: Let me take issue with the way that you frame that.

Tristan Harris: Great.

Fred Turner: So, I think that what ensues is, not that things don't come up, is that people struggle to be seen in those spaces. So things come up lots of different ways. My favorite example, if you asked me what I think the most important thing that happened in the back end of the 20th century was, I'm actually going to say ACT UP.

Tristan Harris: Can you explain more about what ACT UP was?

Fred Turner: Oh, sorry, ACT UP, AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power. This is during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. Gay men were not being properly treated. Medicines weren't being developed. Research wasn't being done. And rather than stay quiet and wait for the system to manage itself, they took action. They shouted, "We're here and we're queer." They flew flags. They marched through the streets. They were willing to be outrageous in every sense of the word.

Tristan Harris: They dialed it up.

Fred Turner: Oh, they dialed it the way up. And in dialing it up, they made themselves in some sense, often a media spectacle, but they also claimed space on that stage of news.

Tristan Harris: That was the mechanism to become visible inside of a centralized media. It's not that there are not ways to become visible. And I think it's just different strategy.

Fred Turner: That's exactly it. Yeah.

## Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

### Episode 23: When Media Was for You and Me

Tristan Harris: I'm trying to play the counter role because people always say, well, that we wouldn't have all of these powerful voices that are suddenly breaking through. And the mainstream cultural narrative and moral consensus tends to lag the most. The kind of frontier voices or points of view that are not being heard.

Fred Turner: It's just not true. Go back to the civil rights movement. The Edmund Pettus Bridge. African-American men and women marched under signs saying, "I am a man. Do not discriminate against me." They claimed the public stage. They marched on Washington and claimed their rights. And that's a hard won, hard fought public campaign that actually got a lot of coverage that changed America. And black Panthers, more similarly a little later. Social movements do get coverage. The idea that they are off the screen in a mass media world is simply not accurate. What I'm much more concerned about is our world where everything is on the screen, but nothing is real. If everything's on the screen, but everybody claims that it's being delivered from a propagandistic point of view and there's no shared fact base, then you lose the ability to debate anything.

Tristan Harris: Exactly. So, that's why I think the design principle of any media environment that does not protect the constitution or the democratic norms that allowed for Facebook to exist in the first place is not therefore doing its job to protect the values that allowed its emergence in the first place.

Fred Turner: I totally agree, but there's a collision here that scares the heck out of me. This is one of the things that I think about a lot now. And it's the collision between the technological possibility of personalization and the advertising imperative of niche marketing. The social American dream of a hyper-personalized world, where I get to be fully myself collides directly with the advertiser's dream of a market of one. And you end up with a society that is hyper individuated, hyper-polarized and unable to think and collaborate together. I think that one of the design principles that I actually think of as anti-democratic is in fact personalization. I think deep personalization is one of the most anti-democratic things tech firms do. But they do it, partly to serve users and partly to serve their advertisers.

Tristan Harris: I always move to game theory. Imagine two kinds of newsfeed companies. One that personalizes to your interest in one that does not. The one that personalizes gets more engagement. You scroll longer. You still click longer. So, even if you said, "Look, I actually, I'm right here with you, Fred and Tristan. I agree that we need to stop personalizing." But if they do that and the other guys don't, then they actually lose. And so this is where it gets into this weird space, because who are we to regulate the attention economy? We would clearly need something like this for the tech platforms. I mean, I'm imagining a world where thoughtful breaks... That was a standard. So imagine that there's no such thing as infinite scrolling forever.

Tristan Harris: And in children's television, we used to regulate that there was a break between children's programs. Because you have to allow the child's mind to wake up and ask, "Do I want to go here? Do I want to go play outside?" And there's a moment of choice. And you can imagine that Pinterest, Facebook, YouTube, et cetera, were to enable after some kind of standard period of use. Like this interrupt popup that says, "Do you still want to be doing this?" We'd have to standardize that because it's not going to happen by default. Like a tech designer listening to this can't say, "That's a great idea, I'm going to do that for Facebook." Because they'll get wiped out by YouTube.

## Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

### Episode 23: When Media Was for You and Me

Fred Turner: So, you've just shifted from the world of market and design to the world of politics. And this is really important. And Silicon Valley and the tech world have pushed against politics for a very long time. Partly because Washington doesn't really understand a lot of the tech. But also partly because you don't want regulation interfering with your profit making.

Tristan Harris: Right.

Fred Turner: And that's a real problem. Tech world has claimed, "We speak for the public good and the public good is about connecting and being friends."

Tristan Harris: But we know that that's bull... They speak for their commercial interests.

Fred Turner: We know now that it's false. Right. They speak absolutely for commercial interests, and that's the point. So who speaks for the public? That's the question here.

Tristan Harris: Exactly.

Fred Turner: And ironically, particularly here in California, and in sort of hyper individualist West. But across America, many people are reluctant to answer the government. I'm not reluctant to answer the government. I think it's absolutely critical that we find voices for the public good and ensconce them in positions where they are not beholden to commercial interests. One of the things we suffer from acutely in our government right now, is kleptocracy. It's essentially the takeover of state processes by financial organizations. That kleptocratic model has come and gone across American history. It's not a given and we should absolutely recover the state. I'll give an example of public broadcasting. Public broadcasting now is well under 15% from state funding. It's predominantly advertisers funding at this point. We could rebuild public broadcasting. Think about what happened when Sesame Street came along.

Tristan Harris: Right.

Fred Turner: Sesame Street changed children's lives. I learned-

Tristan Harris: Mr. Rogers.

Fred Turner: Mr. Rogers. Think about Mr. Rogers. What could the state do? And what could companies committed to public good do to support Mr. Rogers. And I think one of the things that scare me the most as I travel around Mountain View in Palo Alto is a kind of savvy resignation that you see in the tech world. Where people are super smart, but they sort of say, "Well, we can't really change it. The market's the market, and we have to be responsible to the market and to our shareholders." And look guys, I'm sorry, you can change it.

Tristan Harris: The American effort to inoculate its own citizens about the risk of fascist propaganda entering into the country in the 1940 saying, "No, no, no. Don't follow that." Can we create a mass public awareness campaign? And does it work?

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### Episode 23: When Media Was for You and Me

Fred Turner: Yeah. So we absolutely can create a public awareness campaign and it does work. The question is how you want it to work and in what timescale. So, short term campaigns are, I think very tough to run. And they're tough to run in a way that preserves the integrity and agency of the people who are your targets. During World War I, we launched the largest internal inside the US propaganda effort ever launched. The government sent around creatures called Four Minute Men, who were reliable people in every township. Who would get up and speak for four minutes on why it was important that we joined World War I and join the allies.

Tristan Harris: Really.

Fred Turner: They were all through the United States. And it was the experience of that propaganda effort, with its postering. With its radio campaigns. With its Four Minute Men, that caused people to be so concerned as World War II starts up in the US. We've already kind of gone to war on the basis of propaganda once. Now we're in this new space. We don't want our people to be fascist. So, the challenge is doing it quickly. You could do a four minute man campaign, and I would love to see something like that. Telling people what the risks actually are. And I think that we are at a moment where we've got to ring a fire bell.

Tristan Harris: We're in an election year.

Fred Turner: We're in an election year. We've got to be ringing fire bells as loudly as possible. And with respect to our leaders are never going to ring those bells because some of them are involved in the problem. So, okay. So we've got to ring those bells. That's a short term emergency, call the ambulance, get the sirens going situation.

Tristan Harris: And Facebook could distribute such a campaign instantly. And also do... Similar to when there's a security breach and your data is leaked to Equifax, et cetera. They could do information operations breaches and say, "Hey, you were influenced by an Iranian influence operation. You were influenced by a Saudi Arabia influence." And then people would have a reason to believe it, because the only company that knows who is affected is actually the platform itself.

Fred Turner: Right.

Tristan Harris: And so, they should be the one responsible for doing notification, just like we do in cybersecurity.

Fred Turner: One of the things we hear all the time in the tech world. We've heard it a lot in the past and still even hear it now is, if we don't treat our customers with respect, they will leave us. Well, that's not true under conditions of monopoly, which we're approaching. But in any case, I would love to see users of Facebook treated like citizens and see the leaders of Facebook and other firms as publicly interested actors. Support the public good. So that's step one. There's another layer though, where I think the Committee for National Morale and the folks around it were especially effective, and that's the long term. We're entering a world where deep fakes are not going to go away. Bots are not going away. The idea of setting up sock puppet accounts not going away. These are all sort of-

## Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

### Episode 23: When Media Was for You and Me

Tristan Harris: Realities.

Fred Turner: These are realities. And they're with us now for the long haul. And so, we need to build in high schools, in colleges, as we're trying to do here at Stanford. Training programs that help people be alert to the possibility that they're being manipulated.

Tristan Harris: We did this before in the 1940s.

Fred Turner: We've done this before. Yes, we've done this before and we can do it again. The effects will be slow, but they will be real. And our democracy depends on them.

Tristan Harris: And you have one example. I think in China.

Fred Turner: Yeah. I have an example of a kind of program that actually worked quite well. It's an experiment by a professor named David Yang. He's an assistant professor at Harvard, and he did an 18 month experiment with Chinese college students. And you'll know in China, the internet is actually quite locked down. It feels to many Chinese people like a very diverse information environment, but it's not the open internet as we understand it. So, he created a proxy server and allowed Chinese students, college students to access the open internet. They were uninterested. They had no desire.

Tristan Harris: So if you're in China, you think you've got access to all the information already. And then someone gives you this other door and says, "There's more information behind this one." But you're like, "No. I already have all this information."

Fred Turner: Not going there. Not going there. Right? So then he paid a group of Chinese students. He paid them to read the New York times in Chinese and their minds were blown. And they realized what it was they were missing and they flooded toward that proxy server. And so, what can we do to give ourselves the equivalent of the New York Times in Chinese? What can we do to show ourselves what the other possibilities are? The leaders of the tech industry have been astonishingly baroquely remiss in not serving the public good. And in claiming that what they do for product development and market development is the same thing as the public good. It's just not.

Fred Turner: So they need to do that. The state needs to support the public and build infrastructures for the public good. And we ourselves have roles. Particularly as technologist and people in the tech world in trying to say to ourselves, "How can I be both an employee and a citizen? I have power in both realms. How can I be those things at the same time?" And when we start to think that way, it's really a shift in thinking, then we really can start to build a better world. We've done it before and we can do it again.

Tristan Harris: I really hope that people ask the question. We've had this inquiry before of what is democratic propaganda? What is democratic influence, and what are democratic media environments that genuinely serve the public interest? And are actually asking how do we help people be more tolerant, egalitarian and able to empathize with the other. And recognize that just because we can be seduced by the opposite of that does not mean that that's worth enshrining as our future.

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### **Episode 23: When Media Was for You and Me**

Fred Turner: Yeah. I really, really agree with that. And I keep thinking of that old line from rock and roll. "Who are you going to serve? Who are you going to serve?" And life's short, you might work for Google, but who are you going to serve? And I appreciate the ways that you're serving the good, the public good.

Tristan Harris: Well, Fred, thank you so much for coming on the podcast. We are so honored to have you here.

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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