Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast Episode 30: The Courage to Connect

Tristan Harris:	A day before the presidential inauguration, political pollster Frank Luntz asked a small group of voters to describe the United States in one word.
Frank Luntz:	Jim.
Jim:	Divided.
Frank Luntz:	Lisa.
Lisa:	Deceased.
Frank Luntz:	Deceased, oh my god.
Lisa:	Amen.
Frank Luntz:	Stephanie.
Stephanie:	Lost.
Frank Luntz:	Spencer.
Spencer:	Delusional.
Frank Luntz:	This is awful. This is awful.
Tristan Harris:	This is actually the polite part of the conversation.
Speaker 7:	You have people who have chosen to completely ignore facts and reason for fantasy and wild delusion.
Tristan Harris:	If you listen closely, you'll hear voters on the left and the right agree, yes, delusion is the problem.
Speaker 8:	Absolutely right.
Speaker 9:	100% agree.
Tristan Harris:	And then you'll want to cover your ears.
Speaker 9:	Somebody please explain what facts you have that has not been [crosstalk 00:00:54].
Pamela:	Well, you're not even listening. [crosstalk 00:00:57]. You're just blabbing. You're not even listening to anybody's response. [crosstalk 00:01:03]. You're not listening to anybody's response. [crosstalk 00:01:08].
Frank Luntz:	Everybody stop.

Pamela: Did you go and listen to the Georgia hearing?

Frank Luntz: Pamela stop. [Camile 00:01:16], everybody stop. [crosstalk 00:01:17].

Pamela: ... any of the Georgia hearing?

Frank Luntz: Pamela stop, or I'll disconnect you.

Tristan Harris: You can watch the full clip on Frank Luntz's Twitter feed, along with many other clips that show how our national conversation is not just polarized, it's breaking down. He's never seen voters fight like this.

Frank Luntz: I've really had it. I've had it with how people behave towards each other. I've had it with the rudeness. I've had it with the yelling and the screaming. Why can't we have a normal conversation? You people dislike Congress because you said they don't get along. Well you behave the same way they do, you do exactly what they do.

Tristan Harris: Frank has been doing this for decades, and yet he's saying what so many of us are feeling. After 10 years of social media, spinning us through self reinforcing cycles of outrage, how do we depolarize our conversations? How can we talk to each other? Today, we have two guests on our show who prove that we can.

Ciaran O'Connor: I think a lot of people come at this work with the angle of how can we get everyone to agree? Can't we all just be centrists and develop the ultimate bipartisan compromise?

Tristan Harris: That's Ciaran O'Connor of Braver Angels, an organization that convinces Democrats and Republicans to meet, but not necessarily in the middle.

Ciaran O'Connor: We sort of operate from a different perspective, which is that we need conflict. Conflict is natural. Conflict is going to arise regardless. But conflict can actually be a pathway to intimacy and connection rather than division, if you have the right structure to bringing people together.

Tristan Harris: We're about to hear how Braver Angels develop a structure for those conversations between Democrats and Republicans. We'll ask their National Ambassador, John Wood, to walk us through the techniques that they've refined through years of trial and error.

John Wood: There are things at Braver Angels that I think we have learned, that we've discovered that we can build upon, that work.

Tristan Harris: Which will lead us to an even more urgent question.

John Wood: How do you scale that up and apply that to the digital space, given that that is the key battlefield, so to speak? And I'm hoping that we can help each other get

	a little bit of momentum on the answer to that question, man. So that's why I'm stoked to be here on the live with you.
Tristan Harris:	John is the National Ambassador of Braver Angels. Ciaran is the Chief Marketing Officer. Together, they've helped build an organization of 15,000 members who are fighting for a healthier conversation every day. Today on the show, we'll consider what Braver Angels has learned and what technology companies can do to scale it. Because this [crosstalk 00:03:44].
Pamela:	[crosstalk 00:03:44] you're not listening to anybody's response. [crosstalk 00:03:49].
Tristan Harris:	... must stop. I'm Tristan Harris, and this is Your Undivided Attention. It is fantastic to be with you guys, and I think we're just here together to try to figure out what are the moves that are available to reclaim some shared reality and ability to have conversations. We have some urgent problems we're facing. And if that clip by Frank Luntz represents where we are in politics and in just our ability to have conversations with each other right now, we're in some serious trouble. And I do worry that it is representative of where we are conversationally. And do you guys want to just kick off with a little bit about maybe your backgrounds too, and your reactions to that clip?
John Wood:	So this is John Wood, Jr. Yeah, it is daunting, that clip from Frank Luntz sort of shows you. That is the chatter playing in the back of the American mind right now or in the front of it, actually. We are living in a universe of narratives that unfold in parallel, that intersect in certain places, but largely deliver us to just totally separate realities.
Ciaran O'Connor:	I think that clip shows that when it comes to conversations generally and particularly conversation about politics, people are so conditioned now to see them as zero-sum games. As soon as politics comes up in the conversation, you can feel your fist start to clench. Your blood starts to boil. People get defensive and argumentative. They're not really listening to what people are saying. They're waiting to make their next point. They're talking past one another. They're mutually suspicious.
Ciaran O'Connor:	And so at Braver Angels, we try to completely reframe that by first asking people to talk about their lived experiences, because at the end of the day, it's a lot harder to invalidate someone's lived experience than it is to show them why they're wrong. Why your source of news is better than theirs, why you have the facts and they don't? So that's often where we start is we encourage people to talk about what are the experiences you've had that have shaped your world view.
Tristan Harris:	When was Brave Angels found and how did this all begin?

Ciaran O'Connor:	So Braver Angels began about three weeks after the 2017 election, and it started with a model, a workshop model, that was developed according to the principles of family therapy, specifically couples therapy. It was developed by Dr. William Doherty. He's a professor at the University of Minnesota, one of the country's foremost family therapy experts who work specifically with couples who are on the brink of divorce and are essentially taking one last stab at saving their marriage. And so he's used techniques to help them build trust, better understand each other's perspectives, clarify disagreements, reduce stereotype thinking, and abandon certain expectations that people have going into conversations. Namely that they're going to change the other person's mind to reframe the conversation as an opportunity to listen and learn rather than debate and declare.
Ciaran O'Connor:	And so we did our first workshop three weeks after the 2016 election, we got together 10 folks who had voted for Trump and 10 folks who had voted for Clinton in a small Rust Belt town of South Lebanon, Ohio, for a weekend of intensive workshops. We can talk a little bit more about what those workshops look like, but they're designed toward helping people understand different perspectives and build the trust and relationships that then enable you to explore common ground in good faith. Lo and behold, it turned out that a lot of people in the workshop actually liked each other. We had one guy who was a hardcore Christian Conservative, Tea Party guy, Trump supporter, former police officer. He was a Red. We call folks who lean Conservative, Reds. And then on the Blue side, we had a guy named Kuyar. He's a Muslim, proud progressive Iranian immigrant. They came in super suspicious of one another.
Ciaran O'Connor:	By the end of the workshop, they weren't necessarily any closer to agreement on big policy issues, but they had come to see each other as human beings and start to uncover the shared values that we do have. And so they became friends. They visited each other's places of worship. Greg went to Kuyar's mosque. Kuyar went to Greg's church. And from that workshop, we started doing more workshops and we started planting the seeds for what would become Braver Angels alliances. Essentially a roughly even number of Liberals and Conservatives in a community who continue to meet on an ongoing basis to try to build this citizen's movement. And since that time, we've grown into the nation's largest grassroots organization that's working to bring Red and Blue together and expanded our programming into debate, media, academia, politics.
John Wood:	What we are exporting is more than merely techniques. It is culture, right? It is a sort of a civic culture that really leans into what we refer to as this idea of patriotic empathy, this idea that your love for your country is captured in your concern for your neighbor. And even though most people who participate in our programs probably don't become members, they're touched by that and they carry the norm on with them. And that we can point to how this works in local communities, we can point to how this works and interactions between Braver Angels members in their communities and local city government, so on and so

forth. But it is not necessarily 100% clear how that translates into the digital space. And so that's part of where the attention needs to go.

Tristan Harris:
Right. I think the specific topic that brings us here today is not just helping us understand someone else's point of view. It's this broader thing of how do we construct a new shared reality from the distance that we're now caught in. I'm curious actually, when you think about applying your process, if you were in the room with Frank Luntz and those voters who were totally missing each other and that was a Zoom call in that case. Do you have any kind of step-by-step process that you would run to depolarize that group?

Ciaran O'Connor:
I think one thing that we do in our workshops is we sort of go in, at least with a Red/Blue Workshop, and we presuppose the polarity that's already there. We're not saying let's all be purple. We understand there's Reds and Blues. And so, one of the first exercises we have is what we call the stereotypes exercise. And we will actually divide the Reds and Blues into separate rooms. So in one room, it's just the Reds, and then the other room, it's just the Blues. And they each have a moderator. So the moderator will say to the Reds, "We want you to come up with a list of stereotypes that you feel Liberals affix to you." And then the other room, the moderator will say to the Liberals, "You guys need to come up with the top five stereotypes that Republicans call you guys."

Tristan Harris:
The other side in the room when they say this out loud, the stereotypes of them, are they doing just for themselves?

Ciaran O'Connor:
So it starts separately. So the Conservatives will be in one room and they say, "Well, Liberals think we're racist. They think we're stupid. They think we're gun nuts. They think we're Bible-thumpers." And they'll go through and sort of create a list. And for each stereotype, they'll discuss it as ingroup why they think that stereotype is false or misleading or exaggerated, but also if there's a kernel of truth there. Meanwhile, you have the Blues in the other room saying, "Well, Conservatives think we're elitists. They think we're baby killers. They think we're tax and spend, want to give handouts to everyone," and they will be going through and talking about why it's unfair, but also if there's a kernel of truth.

Ciaran O'Connor:
Then we bring the two sides together, and essentially have one member of each group present to the larger group, and then they'll have a discussion about what they learned. And what's interesting about this exercise is that it kind of gets those nasty stereotypes that we all have out in the open, but rather getting it out of one side, saying it to the other side of like, "You're a racist," or "You're a baby killer." It kind of comes organically from each side and they get to see the other side wrestle with the stereotypes and talk about, "Well, is there a kernel of truth?"

Tristan Harris:
That's so brilliant. It reminds me of I think one way that we become trustworthy to someone else is by being able to demonstrate before the other person even says what they think. We can actually show understanding for what they're thinking. And if we can't do that, then it... Imagine someone apologizes, but

they don't demonstrate that they understand the thing that the other person needs them to apologize for, it's not really a valid apology. And not that this is about the situation you're talking about is about generating apologies, but it's about, I think, the showcasing that there's a self-understanding of those stereotypes just, and like you're saying, takes the invisible dark matter that people wouldn't say ever, and putting that at the center of the conversation just to sort of get it on the table, it must be so... What happens in the room after that, what's the change in room feel?

Ciaran O'Connor: It is really remarkable because it's almost like a collective exhale. And for the two groups to also see the other group wrestling with the kernel of truth is really powerful because Democrats will see Reds saying, "Well, it's incredibly unfair that we get labeled racist because we're Conservative. But there is maybe a kernel of truth that white supremacist groups tend to vote Republican more than Democrat," that's a simple example. But it shows the two sides seeing each other, A, in a richer and more comprehensive way, but also sees them evincing empathy and humility, not just sheer handedness and bad faith, which is how we've been conditioned to see the other side. So that's one exercise, the second one... And first, I should say, all credit goes to Bill Doherty, our workshop designer. I did not come up with this sitting in my apartment as much as I would have liked it.

John Wood: Bill is the guru.

Tristan Harris: And did this in his work come up from the discipline of marriage counseling? Is there a similar parallel methods in kind of couples counseling where you, the person says, "This is how I think I'm seen by the other side and this is the partial truth in what that stereotype?"

Ciaran O'Connor: Yes, exactly. And it's been amazing to watch him translate couples therapy to politics, but it works well if you think about it, because we're on the brink of a civil divorce as a country, but we can't really get divorced. I mean, that would be essentially a Civil War. And I think almost everyone can agree that we don't want to go down that path. And so the alternative is conversation, but productive conversation rather than counter-productive conversation, which can actually make people more dug in. The second exercise I can just talk about and then, John, I'll let you jump in too, is the Fishbowl exercise.

Ciaran O'Connor: And that is designed to help the two sides get a better sense of the other side in their own words. So we would start, for example, with the Conservatives sitting in a small circle in the middle of the room and then the Liberals sitting in a wider circle around, essentially looking into the Fishbowl. And when the Conservatives are in the middle of the room, only they can talk. So it's a moderator, and the Conservatives are having a discussion with other Conservatives. Maybe it's 30 minutes long. Meanwhile, the Democrats just know they're just silent and taking notes. They don't have the pressure of having to respond.

Ciaran O'Connor:	What this does is it lets the Democrats see the Conservatives talking in their own language. And so we'll ask them, "Why do you identify as a Conservative? Why do you believe that your side's policies and values are good for the country?" You'll hear all kinds of different answers. You'll start to understand that it's not a stereotype, that it's not monolithic. We'll also ask them, "Well, do you have any reservations about your own side?" And lo and behold, people have incredible reservations. Even hardcore Trump supporters will say like, "I think he can be a real jerk. I wish he wouldn't tweet so much." So people start to see that more complex picture and then we'll sort of do the same thing, flip sides.
Ciaran O'Connor:	And then again, we bring everyone together to discuss what commonalities did you see and what did you learn? And this sort of, people can reflect back to one another. And through this process, you're also just building that human element, right? When you hear a group of people talk amongst themselves for 30 minutes, people will laugh and people will smile, or you'll even see people grimacing when they see a guy in the middle say something that they just think is crazy. But it's not in a direct confrontation where they're suddenly going to call them out. John, why don't you jump in and add a little spice and context to this?
John Wood:	Well, I was going to call our attention actually to the third activity in the Red/Blue Workshop, which is where we take... The moderator will split up the group and pair individuals from each side with each other. You might have two individuals from each side, but they will ask why the person on the other side believes something. But the moderator is there to guide the framing of the question. If you are a Blue speaking to a Red and you're, let's say, curious about the question of why they are pro-life?
John Wood:	The wrong way to ask the question is why don't you think women should have control over their own bodies? Right. Because truth be told, that is the way Conservative beliefs are characterized on the subject. But generally speaking, Conservatives do not think in their own mind, "I really want to keep women from making their own decisions today. How can I do that?" Even if it amounts to that from a progressive perspective. And so if a person starts to ask the question that way, the moderator will sort of gently redirect them.
Tristan Harris:	So there's a moderator in the middle between each couple, meaning there's a third person for each group of two?
John Wood:	Yeah. No, you might have... And so we take turns. In the Red/Blue Workshop, there are only two moderators overall, so they'll bounce from one pairing to the other. And others are listening to this process. But a core aspect of what it is we do across many of our activities, I think, including the Red/Blue Workshop, is we seek to cultivate in people the capacity to be able to reflect the views of the other party in terms that the other party might him or herself used to describe their own point of view to reflect a person's beliefs in an emotionally accurate way, not just in a way that's technically accurate from your own subjective point

of view, but in a way that is emotionally accurate in language that will resonate with the other individual. And this gets to something that I heard you say a few minutes ago, Tristan, which is I think that you referenced the importance of people genuinely feeling heard and understanding that they've been heard by a party in a conversation.

John Wood: And so, Bill, as an acronym that he employs that applies across the spectrum of our activities, it's LAPP, L-A-P-P, and the acronym is L for listen, A for acknowledge, P for pivot, and P again for perspective. Right. So the idea is that you listen to the other party, you acknowledge the other party and part of acknowledging is paraphrasing. So rather than saying, "You don't believe that women should have a right to their own bodies." Blue might say to a Red, "Your belief is that life is sacred even in the womb, and that while a woman is equal and has a right to choose, none of us have a right to choose when to end the life of another innocent human being, even in the context of pregnancy, because life is so sacred."

John Wood: Right. And that framing, that articulation of it is far more likely to be emotionally resonant with the person who actually holds that belief. So that is an aspect of acknowledgement. Pivot is just, it's a transitional sort of marker, employing perhaps an I-statement as opposed to a truth statement. So a true statement would be, unborn babies are not really alive in a meaningful way. It's technical, but it's not morally the equivalent of somebody who's out of the womb, so on and so forth. Rather than just launching into your perspective, you pivot by saying, "This is why I feel differently about the issue. Or in my experience, this looks a bit of a different way."

John Wood: And then in rooting the perspective that follows in your subjectivity, using that I-frame, this is how I feel, then you can shift in the direction of the final step, which is offering your perspective. So if you're a pro-choice individual, you might say, "Well, in my experience, I feel that, on the one hand, life in the womb hasn't really developed in the way that a person who is fully conscious is. And that makes it a different kind of moral equation. But what I know or at least what I feel is that a woman's right to choose is really a sovereign thing." And that's a sacred thing in and of itself. And I don't think we can have meaningful equality without that. The substantive disagreement remains.

Tristan Harris: Right. The disagreement hasn't disappeared, it's still restated, actually.

John Wood: Exactly.

Ciaran O'Connor: But also, it connects the value of sanctity on both sides.

John Wood: It does connect the value of sanctity on both sides. And it also does so in a way that one makes the other party feel heard. And in the pivot, you do so in a way where employing that I-statement, you insert a tone of humility there. And humility is an important factor here, because when I say, "Well, in my opinion,

in my experience or the way I feel about this," rather than just stating your opinion as if it were a fact and maybe it is a fact. But rather than stating it that way, you introduce a degree of modesty that implies respect for the other individual in the sense that it does not come across as you considering your vantage point, your perspective, to be superior by virtue of the fact that you hold it, that you're Blue, that this person is Red, and therefore, by definition, in some sense, their opinion ought to be marginalized in the conversation.

John Wood: Humility implies a respect for the other party, which signals to the other party that you are treating them as an equal in the dialogue and seeking to bring them in collaboratively. And within that, the seed of trust is sown and that, in and of itself, sprouts from a starting point of goodwill, necessarily, that part of it has to be there if you're going to pay them the respect of hearing them and presenting yourself in a humble fashion before them.

Ciaran O'Connor: And obviously, we've been working on the ground with real people face-to-face and then since March, essentially exclusively on Zoom, which presents some challenges, you don't get the same level of intimacy that you might get in a face-to-face workshop, but it also has some distinct advantages. One, you can do really interesting geographical exposure. I can get a group of folks in wealthy suburb in Massachusetts and a group of folks in rural Louisiana Parishes, get them on Zoom for an hour.

Ciaran O'Connor: If I was going to do that in person, it would take lots of time and money. And then you also have some folks who just might not be comfortable going to something in person. They're more of a homebody. They can log on to Zoom, they can hide their video if they want. So the opportunities are there for scale. But the further you get from face-to-face, the further you even get from Zoom, once you, God forbid, get on Facebook, all those sort of structures and containers start to disintegrate. And I think that's kind of the nut that we're all trying to crack.

Tristan Harris: It's interesting that as you had to bring it online, you're forced to ask the design question of what digital-social spaces look like that are enabling of high trust. And then in our work at the Center for Humane Technology, we talk about how the existing digital spaces that we've had never been for that. But we're kind of converging in the center, where you're trying to bring something that works in the offline to the online digitally. We're sort of taking what we know wasn't working online and try to bend it towards the kind of healthy debate. And we're sitting on the same design project really to figure out how do we do that?

John Wood: Well, one interesting thing that I think has work to our advantage in bringing people into these online gatherings and preserving some real degree of warmth and empathy and relational texture in the context of these conversations and workshops has been the fact that we have built the membership organization. I think that we've probably had about 15,000 people or so. We've paid dues to be members, our programs have touched a much larger number of people. But in addition to that, we have about 70 local Braver Angels Alliances in communities,

I mean, ranging from Los Angeles to Austin, Texas, to New York to just about every other state. Some of them are campus-based and so forth.

John Wood: When we have gatherings online, there are frequently people who have experienced being actively in community with each other for some period of time. And so other people who are coming into these spaces are oftentimes stepping into a communal environment where there is a certain normative culture already in place. Even if it's just sort of a workshop where all you have are a couple of moderators who have done this together before, they themselves are carrying with them a culture of norms that is reinforced by a community. And that kind of social cross pollination, I think is powerful, because what it means is that even though we're not able to sort of reach out and shake hands and hug, and you're missing some of the in-person elements, what there is, is an environment of felt empathy, if you will. People are used to each other to some degree and strangers coming into that space feel that.

Ciaran O'Connor: And just one thing I would add to that is that our work is very action-oriented. I think that a lot of times people online, when they're engaging in politics, it's a very consumptive experience. You're talking at or talking about people. You're not really talking with them and you're consumed by this gnawing anger or sense of helplessness where you're just scrolling and you're just reading about the opposing team that's hurting you and your community and your sense of community and even increasingly your sense of identity is not really formed around positive values, but is formed in opposition to another tribe.

Ciaran O'Connor: That's what unites your team, is that you all hate the other side. And what we found is that when we give people an opportunity to not just talk but actually work and organize together, that kind of transcends political differences and is actually particularly attractive to Conservatives who might be suspicious of the more wishy-washy or touchy feely perceptions they have of dialogue. Here's an opportunity to actually make your voice heard on a level playing field. Put your shoulder to the wheel with someone you disagree with and you're doing it with them because you guys disagree, but because you subscribe to a higher patriotism that wants to hold the country together and wants to create more hope and less despair.

Tristan Harris: I saw on your website, there's some words that you had to figure out how to describe what you're doing in a way that would be open and attractive to kind of all the different sides so as not to alienate. And I can imagine if you use certain hippy-dippy words of non-violent communication or things like that, you're probably not going to bring people from the right. And if you use certain other words, you're going to alienate other groups. I find that also interesting because we don't just have a reality fracture, we have a language fracture. We have immediate dog whistles that even just by using one moral frame, we invoke, "I see. I can mind read him or her. They just already believe this. We don't even have a chance of connecting."

Tristan Harris: I mean, an example, if someone in their Twitter profile has the pronouns he/him, she/her, they, versus if someone in their profile has a American flag in their bio, immediately, there's a sense that, "I know which T-shirt they're wearing." And I think if we... Because of the level of division that we're now in and how deep it is, I think being aware of those invisible t-shirts that we don't realize that we're wearing, which might predispose people to not even engage with not even just open mind but an open heart, open relational dynamic like you're talking about. I just think this is one of those under-emphasized things that you guys are doing with making sure that the doorway is open.

John Wood: But that, I don't think can come before the actual rehabilitation of the sense of community that exists between us. And that, in turn, has to be a function, as Ciaran said, of trust. And I think that if you wanted to even insert something a layer beneath that, in my mind, it starts really with the value or virtue of goodwill as the our primary starting point for all social interaction, for all social and civic engagement. And so a large strain of philosophical influence within Braver Angels and certainly for myself personally, derives from the teachings of Kingian Nonviolence, right, the nonviolence of Martin Luther King Jr.

John Wood: And in the nonviolent philosophy, Dr. King teaches, as others have taught, that love is a social value. And King understood love as being not affectionate or romantic love, but a love that simply equates to goodwill. This idea that we intend the best, even for those people who we disagree with, even for those people who actively oppose us on matters of justice or freedom or any other range of things. And King, explain the value of this in a couple of ways. On the one hand, love or goodwill in this sense is a more effective vehicle of speaking to the conscience of the opposition, if you will, signaling to the opposition that even though we are at odds and even though I seem to prevail on a certain question, ultimately, we do not seek to humiliate the opponent.

John Wood: But to win his friendship and understanding if it is possible, and to co-create community together, if we can move to the place of realizing a higher truth together. And even if you fail to win somebody over in that way, you alleviate from yourself the psychological burden of hatred. You alleviate yourself the psychological burden of fear, because when you love somebody and actively intend the good for them, you're much more disposed to see their humanity. And it's a little bit harder to be afraid of somebody who you genuinely understand.

John Wood: Therefore, we need, I think, a language as well as norms that correspond to the deeper values from which such language might spring, that ultimately seeks to manifest and model what goodwill looks like in practice, in how it is we interact and engage with each other. And so there's sort of an invisible framework of goodwill that surrounds everything that we do on a methodological level, and that also pervades the culture that we are developing in Braver Angels space. And that's what we are exporting out of that space into the broader kind of landscape. So I think that's a good anchoring for the values that drive us and

	how we deal with the epistemological and the language polarization, those impasses.
Tristan Harris:	I look at that clip of Frank Luntz and the community people fighting as the present instantiation of the problems. I think the events of January 6th make this much more real for people. It has never felt more true that we are living in a completely, not just different language set, but different historical balance sheet of grievances that we've seen. Just like it is in a conversation, but unfair thing to do to take the least charitable moment of someone else's actions and to project that with the widest possible surface area and say that person, is this thing that they once did, this one time, and make that the predominant way that we perceive their behavior.
Tristan Harris:	I'm thinking about the Stephen Covey quote that we judge ourselves by our intentions and we judge others by their behavior, meaning we always give ourselves this positive benefit of the doubt, "I would know that my intentions were good and I made this mistake and saying one extreme thing in one moment," but then people will take that one mistake and then blast it out and air it 24/7 on the other side. And when that's happening back and forth, lobbing these threats, these misperceptions of each other, it leaves no room for even saying it's worthwhile for me to engage in a conversation for you because it looks like the grievance balance sheet is so long that you don't deserve my coming to you with good faith and goodwill.
Tristan Harris:	I don't want to make it so extreme, but that's kind of where I worry about when I think about the additional layers of distortion that social media adds. It creates this almost insurmountable hill of evidence about why the other side shouldn't even really be worth talking to. And that adds a second layer, which I'm sure I'll get into and you guys deal with all the time, is the dehumanization frame, which is that I no longer view them as worthy of my good faith, stepping out of myself and being kind and reaching out my hand and giving the benefit of the doubt. That's what I'm worried about, is how do we heal when the fractures run that deep in among so many different parts of the stack, the relational stack, the language stack, the trust stack, the information stack.
Ciaran O'Connor:	One thing to keep in mind is that oftentimes the disincentive for reaching out or if you think about it like a battlefield where each side is in its own trench, being willing to try to cross the minefields, the disincentives often come from your own tribe, much more so than the other side. And so, people are less worried about, "Someone I disagree with is going to call me a bad name, but someone in my tribe is going to call me a sellout, or accuse me of abandoning my values," because there's this perception on both sides that even engaging with another perspective is somehow akin to surrendering your own perspective. And that's why we emphasize goodwill. But we also emphasize courage and bravery, not just to withstand the vitriol that you're going to get from people who see things differently, but to withstand the judgment that you're going to get from people who are going to accuse you of deviating from tribal orthodoxy.

John Wood:

Ciaran makes a very key point. When you enter into Braver Angels, you also have the experience of sharing a space with people who share your own political preferences, who are also committed to this wider ethical frame that is rooted in goodwill.

Tristan Harris:

Meaning you're seeing your own tribe committed to the openness to the other side, versus that what you were saying Ciaran about feeling like my tribe is about to expel me for even reaching my hand out.

Ciaran O'Connor:

Precisely. And so, if I'm going to try and riff a little bit here, you're probably roughly familiar with Maslow's hierarchy of needs. I have a friend, George Halvorson, who's the founder of Kaiser Permanente and the President of the InterGroup Institute. He's got a very similar period which works on the group level at six triggers for intergroup alignment. And at the bottom of that is survival, level up from that is common enemy. One thing that motivates groups to band together is when they have recognized a common opposition. A level up from that is teamwork, collaboration. We have a common purpose, but a level even above that is the level of us, not just collaborating towards a shared functional end, but actually being possessed of an overarching, mutually shared identity, within which, we have a felt connection to one another that goes beyond shared-strategic ends.

Ciaran O'Connor:

And then at the top of that pyramid, there's collective adherence to a shared mission, a shared vision. One thing that occurs to me is that on Twitter, you have the little heart icon, right? A lot of times I will feel a uncertainty when I go to hit like button sometimes because there's always this question of what does it mean to like a comment, right. Because it could mean a couple of different things. Am I signaling agreement or am I signaling basically goodwill? Right. A lot of times I'm tempted to like a comment that somebody might put on a post of mine. Not so much, because I agree with it.

Ciaran O'Connor:

Sometimes it can just be way out of left field on the substance, but I will see that, "But this person is coming in the right spirit." And sometimes I might follow that up with a comment that reveals that like, "I'm not totally with you in what you're saying, but I get where you're coming from." And one particular question I had for you, it's just detailed question. Is it possible to have an algorithm that functions in a way that takes inventory of what your starting preferences are and then returns you results that might broaden your perspective, that would make us better people and give us clearer windows into one another.

Tristan Harris:

So a few things come to mind. I mean, in general, what I hear you saying is, can we run experiments about, and explore the design space of alternative feedback and cultural norms that can be almost read right as opposed to this game of who can get their viral content to go the furthest, which is kind of the invisible game of Facebook and Twitter, is playing the fame lottery, the virality lottery. Obviously, not everyone's playing that game, but that's kind of the broader construction, especially of the kind of Twitter-focused game. You made me think

of a few different things. So one is the future on Slack where you get to actually pick the emoji that you want to pile on to someone and then it creates a kind of a counter. Right.

Tristan Harris: That's kind of one direction what you're talking about, where essentially imagine there's something that's kind of a 'Thank You' button. So it's a thank you for that thought. And I think this actually happens in kind of group dynamics. Like people say, "When someone says something that you agree with, can you put your hands up and do a little jazz hands or something like that?" Right. That's almost like a emoji that we're inventing in real time, saying, "Hey, in this social dynamic, in this social space, are there new signals in a culture we can adopt that signals the things that we care about? And can we remake the meaning of those signals and those icons and those gestures, so that they actually construct a culture that we're looking for?" And overall, what I hear you saying is [crosstalk 00:39:24].

John Wood: Jazz hands is a huge part of what we do programmatically. Shout out to April Lawson, who brought that into the mix. Yeah.

Tristan Harris: Yeah. I mean, in general, also part of what I hear you exploring is we're not just looking for a new feature or a tweak, we're looking for something that is creating virtuous cycles, where the more people contribute, the more cohesion there is, the better ideas their share there is, the more gratitude there is, the more dignity is spread around, the more of the Maslow's hierarchy or that group hierarchy you're talking about is satisfied and fulfilled. Which actually relates to another thing I was thinking about, which is that one of the earlier podcast episodes we did was with Eli Pariser, who wrote the book 'Filter Bubble'.

Tristan Harris: And we talked about when your healing divides, really should be trying to help people have positive political conversations at all, or should we just be doing things together? Should we be playing sports together? Should we be playing games together? I want to see... What if President Biden came out and said, "You know what, instead of my plan to fix social media, I've got a new executive order that's going to have everyone in Congress play football games together. And we're going to be rooting for Mitch as he's running down the football field or we're going to put helmets on. And we don't know who's who and we don't know who's on whose team. So we just feel good about that person who's jogging down, who's almost going to make the touchdown."

Tristan Harris: And we're suddenly rooting for people because we pivot the entire framework from which we're seeing them. The whole point there is the same thing you're saying, which is how do we change the game? How do we change the script that we're operating in? So Slack comes to mind when you talked to earlier about, "Hey, could it capture my preferences of what I'm currently looking at the kind of information I'm getting and then feed me things that broaden that perspective?" Well, there's something right now called ground news that's getting more popularity, and ground news, what it does is depending on which

side of the political aisle you tend to get your news from, it actually tracks in the broader ecosystem the news that doesn't make it if you're on the left into the left ecosystem.

Tristan Harris: So it's not just right leaning news, it's the stuff that's kind of in the blind spot of the left ecosystem more broadly. And then if you're on the right, it tends to track the blind spot of things that are things that are blind spot on the right. And I think that's an interesting framework of... And you're kind of asking about what is Humane Technology? In general, the project of Humane Technology is we obviously, as technologists, have had very little problem building more and more sophisticated tech. But what we need to do is get good at the project of getting more and more sophisticated about human nature. And it's usually by investigating the human weaknesses and the kind of human vulnerabilities, the things that we're not aware of in ourselves and working with them in a productive way as opposed to a maladaptive way, identifying them and then figuring out how to lead to better outcomes.

Tristan Harris: That's kind of the project of Humane Technology. Essentially, it's the insight that our attention is indiscriminate to what we have agency over. In the Savanna, 50,000 years ago, everything you put your attention on that rock, that lion, you can kill that lion, you can throw that rock. So our attention was coupled with what we have agency over. But now, we live in a world where our attention goes to things that we don't have agency over. In fact, more and more of the surface area of our attention is focused on things that we don't have power over and that feels gradually disempowering. It's actually adding kind of disempowerment pollution into the balance sheets and the human nervous systems of everybody as they just sit there in the world basked in inability to change the circumstances that they're constantly seeing that make them more and more upset.

Tristan Harris: If I point my attention to the things I don't have power over, my natural inclinations will point me into doing things that are actually maladaptive or unsuccessful for what I'm intrinsically feeling. And we need these wise practices. I would call your whole process, the Braver Angels process, a kind of humane technology for bringing groups into deeper alignment and allowing more understanding to happen. Nonviolent communication is a humane technology. Byron Katie's the work is a humane technology. Meditation is a humane technology, taking five deep breaths that are seven seconds long and inhale seven seconds long, and inhale, is a humane technology because all of them are operating at some deeper underlying truth about how we work.

John Wood: You can get lost forever in a negative narrative about the other side or a positive narrative about your side that is impressive and psychologically overwhelming because it never ends. And yet, even though it's in this, it is always incomplete because it's not just a matter of the data pointing to a certain narrative being unending, it's still missing the larger spherical reality within which all of these different points of information exist in relation to each other.

Tristan Harris:	You just restated my point better than I could say to myself. I feel emotional [crosstalk 00:43:46].
John Wood:	There you go. But take that point and put it in parallel with what Ciaran was just laying out, which is sort of all the dynamics of our workshop and the different facets of human communication and psychological and emotional revealing that take place over the course of a single workshop. We get to hear people emotionally reveal in a vulnerable way, feel about the stereotypes that are hurled at them. We get to hear people reflect in an honest way about the ways in which they can improve.
John Wood:	We get to observe people's initial emotional triggers and characterizing other people's viewpoints, but then how they engage their listening function to be able to shift that in a way that activates empathy and demonstrates the fact that they're listening. They're all sorts of pieces that go with that. How do we fit those higher aspirations into containers that can either scale or the impact of which can scale even if you can't bring everybody into something quite so structured?
Ciaran O'Connor:	Well, one thing that was emerging there for me, which is exciting and can maybe inform thinking about designing a digital space is the notion of empowerment because people do feel so powerless. And what's really incredible when you go through one of these workshops is how empowering it feels to be able to reach someone. And ironically, if you're an activist and your goal is to persuade somebody and get them to agree with you, this is actually a lot more effective than trying to dunk on them on Twitter.
Ciaran O'Connor:	I think there's this fear among people that paraphrasing someone and acknowledging what they're saying is somehow ceding ground. But if you actually want to reach people, it's very empowering. And that's where the gamification aspect comes in, because what if the goal of the game is to reach this higher place and the way that you do it is going through this framework and you can almost do like a bait and switch, where you're like drawing in people who are polarized and who want to go through the game because they want to learn how to win and learn how to get people to agree or even dominate.
Ciaran O'Connor:	But then they're actually going through this more transformative, transcendent, depolarization experience where even if you disagree with somebody on 90% of issues, if you are able to get to the top of that pyramid, that's where you can work together on that 10%. And that's where you feel empowered, which is the opposite of how people feel now, which I think is helpless.
Tristan Harris:	Yeah. I think that if I go back to the 20 year old version of myself as someone who was optimistic about technology and how do we scale these good things that exists in the world, what I imagine many of us are feeling here is if the process that you're talking about really works so well, if it does unlock so much, can you imagine a world in which the basic premise of what your experience on a Twitter or Facebook would be like on a daily basis with something like this,

where you get to hear people who you think you have no common ground with, you can't ever reach. Start by talking about the stereotypes of them and what the partial truths of those things are and just replicate this entire thing in a digital space.

Tristan Harris: And if that was simply scaled up, imagine every sort of online Twitter fight had a doorway inviting you. If you would like to, if you've got 30 minutes, I don't know how long... The process takes longer, I imagine. But basically, an invitation into a doorway being like, would you like to enter into a pool that is a matching system where you're going to have a conversation in the following format? If you have an hour, here's an interesting space you can move into? And one of the things our digital spaces lack are these sort of different rooms for different purposes. We don't just have this one big national-global public square. We never had that before. It's not really a thing. We need structure. We need process, but we really don't have any mechanism for that.

Tristan Harris: And so, when I first hear you saying is, let's imagine we take the sequence of this process that apparently works so well, and what would it look like to actually have these services implemented? Now, one thought that comes to mind is, first of all, critics will say that's techno utopian, that's what got us here. I think we can excuse that one for a second. The second one is people will say, well, then people won't use the services because Facebook or Twitter, if they were to radically change what their services were about from optimizing the lower levels of this sort of status, hierarchy, survival, anger, tribe outrage, giving me status and I'm better than you. And I got more likes now and I'm more famous. Look, my follower account went up.

Tristan Harris: That entire construct, the business model is essentially preying on pulling us down into those lower level parts of ourselves, that's why we always talk about the business ball being so problematic, because so much is based on it. But you can imagine, especially if there is some kind of publicly funded BBC, like NPR, like public broadcasting version of social media that was really oriented around how we can have many different rooms, that we can walk into many different conversational styles and games that we could we could play. Braver Angels is one group. And there would be, I'm sure there's there's different groups of different kinds of techniques. And I think that's the kind of optimistic vision that keeps us here.

John Wood: Yeah. And I think that you could employ status in digital architectures, such as what we're sort of brainstorming about here and the way it could be effective. So, for instance, if you have these different rooms that you can go into, it's one thing to say, "You've had an exchange on certain subjects or something like that. Do you want to go into this room for 30 minutes?" Well, I mean, that might sound like homework for most of us unless we were able to look at like a list of friends' connections and maybe followers, people we admire, people we like, people we respect, influencers and so forth.

John Wood:
And if I look at a box and it says, "Tristan Harris is in this room right now or something," I might say to myself, "Tristan is in there. Okay, well, he's having a conversation." And now somehow or other it's visually represented to me that like, "He's moving up the perimeter, or he's racking up, I don't know, followers or what have you going through these interactions. Let me follow Tristan through that door." I might not have done it if Tristan wasn't there, but he is. And I think that when you look at the way societies function, generally speaking, we are always going to be social creatures.

John Wood:
And as we organize ourselves socially, you tend to have societies, not just one big hierarchies. Society is a bunch of little hierarchies that exist. And I imagine that there could be some way, even through a somewhat sophisticated and complex, structured social-digital architecture to leverage those points in a way that actually makes participation in such a framework an exciting thing, and something that triggers our quick levels of social and emotional motivation in a way that leads into these higher aspirations. Or at least I should hope so.

Tristan Harris:
I think that's definitely the goal. And like you're saying, I think oftentimes, especially in a post-nature, 'God is dead', secular era view of these things where we're too quick to try to rid ourselves or eliminate these lower level parts of ourselves. I want to call them lower level, just these intrinsic parts of ourselves. When we see ourselves as social primates and we see tribalism, I think oftentimes we think the answer is no tribalism as opposed to no, the answer is healthy tribalism that benefits the whole. The answer is not to have no social status. Social status is very intrinsic to how we organize human societies. But can we have social status accrue to the values that we care about as opposed to fame or influence, which is the current attention, economy, social media, currency of social status?

Tristan Harris:
We can switch that to, as we've mentioned other times on our podcast before, Change My View, which is a Reddit channel dedicated to changing people's minds. And you accrued social status based on your points over time that were, you gained by changing other people's minds, by demonstrating that you were a good facilitator. In this case in your work, I mean, they're the kinds of people who accrue the badges and the status and reputations for being the best moderators for Braver Angels process, I'm sure. I was just curious, when you think of where we are now, is your work getting harder over time because we're losing trust and goodwill?

Ciaran O'Connor:
Well, I can only speak for myself. I feel optimistic and hopeful, but also daunted because it's clear that the headwinds are incredibly stiff, the obstacles are incredibly high. But I think what's changing in our favor is that the appetite is growing across the ideological spectrum for what we're doing. There's an existing baseline appetite for connection and community and meaning, and there's all sorts of studies showing that people's levels of those things are declining. I mean, you see it in levels of anxiety and depression. So the appetite is there and we don't have to convince anyone that this is a problem. The key is scaling. The key is building the pipeline and growing the movement.

Ciaran O'Connor: And we've done it in a very decentralized way. It's very bottom up. It's volunteer-driven, it's action-oriented, and we've been growing fast. But I think the challenge for us in 2021, in this decade and beyond, because this is really a generational challenge, and that's why we're so focused on working with high school students and college students. The challenge is how can we scale to the point where we really have the muscle to not just influence individuals and communities, but influence institutions. The institutions that really shape the direction of American life, whether that's in media or academia or politics. And you look at organizations like the NRA or the Sierra Club, organizations that have millions of members.

Ciaran O'Connor: I think there are organizations that can claim 1% of the population as members. If we could get to that size and then we can really alter the incentives of elites who are creating this vicious cycle rather than a virtuous cycle. And then when you change incentives, that's when you change behavior and you give people permission to do this, so that it becomes natural. Then I think what John and what you were saying is that when thinking about designing a structure, it's important to be clear about the purpose and goal up front. Like that Reddit channel, you walk in knowing that it's about change your mind.

Ciaran O'Connor: You sort of understand why people are there. There's this some element of common purpose, or common struggle or common sacrifice. And so it's hard to think about what could Twitter or Facebook, if they found a conscience, work around the edges to change their platform. I don't know. But if you were creating something from scratch where you are really clear about the goal or how do you win the game or how do you make your way up the hierarchy, I think you would attract people and then you would attract followers who are taking their cues from the larger atmosphere.

John Wood: Yeah, right. Well, I don't have too much to add to that. I mean, I think that, first of all, there is an inverse correlation in a sense to the fortunes of the nation. And I think our own strength and momentum as an organization simply because on the one hand, the problem of our divisions and the consequences thereof become more and more pronounced. But the more pronounced becomes, the greater the awareness of the problem becomes and the greater seriousness with which people treat that. And so, that's certainly been occurring to our favor. I mean, our membership has risen quickly over these last few months. Our fundraising has shot up, more and more serious people are getting engaged with our work asking how they can be a part of it. And I think that we're just at the beginning of that.

John Wood: And so in that sense, this is a very exciting moment for us. But ultimately, it is daunting because the problem is just as big as we've been indicating it is in this conversation. And yet, what does give me some confidence is that I do think that there is ultimately and sort of... I mean, I'm a person of faith. But even if you put that aside, I think that there is an evolutionary impulse within humanity as sort of a collective organism towards generating experiences, connections, and a mode of functionality collectively that is drawn towards a higher way of

being because it is a better way of being and a more satisfying way of being. I mean, there is a greater sort of joy that comes from truly connecting with people and truly loving people.

John Wood:

And I think that the story of humanity, broadly speaking, has been to move in the direction of forging greater and greater bonds across greater and greater differences. Because if that weren't true, I literally don't think we would be here. I certainly would not be here. I'm a person who product of a multicultural and biracial family and family that came together across great socioeconomic divisions in a country that itself has endured as the combination of all sorts of social and cultural elements that would not have easily meshed, and still don't easily mesh, but would not have meshed at all necessarily in ages of human history past.

Tristan Harris:

Yeah, and I think the question we have to ask with the technology side of it is how does technology not make it so that this is an uphill battle of increasing steepness every day? Because sometimes I think of this as like the plastic problem, right? We are generating just so much plastic and we might come up with something that starts to clean up some of the plastic. There's some new algae that will eat it or something like that. But then we're still generating the problem of greater and greater scales because we've got profit motives directly tied to the amount of plastic that gets emitted. And we don't want to be in a cleanup process of polarization or of plastic.

Tristan Harris:

We want to be in a... As you said, have the entire digital environment be doing Braver Angels times a million, I mean, the kind of exponentiated version of what you're all working on, that's so brilliant. And we're going to have more time, I think what I'm really interested in is how do you reflect back to someone else of a different perspective or their point of view when we're so split at the level of history, attention, examples, grievances, understanding, trust? There's this whole other area we didn't really get to go into. But I think the fractures run fractally de-ironically. And we have to find a whole bunch of disciplines.

Tristan Harris:

And as you said, it starts by looking at the technology of human nature and figuring out it's all bare, it's not going to go away. Tribalism is going to be there. The stereotype method that way that our mind consolidates information and creates summaries of other people's view, and those people are like that. And I can mind-read their perspective. That's all just how we naturally work. The question is, how do we get sophisticated about all those natural incarnations and then geometrically have them align to bring out that better part of us, as opposed to use those stereotypes in a way that then just reinforce conflict escalation cycle that only makes things worse?

John Wood:

I think that's perfectly stated. And all that means, therefore, is that we've got to have a round two.

Speaker 13:

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 design by Ryan and Hays Holladay. And a special thanks to the whole Center for Humane Technology team for making this podcast possible.

Tristan Harris: A very special thanks goes to our generous lead supporters at the Center for Humane Technology, including the Omidyar Network, Craig Newmark Philanthropies, Evolve Foundation, and the Patrick J. McGovern Foundation, among many others.