Shamil Idriss: A couple of hundred people stream-in from all across the village and literally sit down and then a play is put out and I don't understand the language, so my colleagues are sharing with me. Okay, this is a story about forced marriage.

Tristan Harris: That's Shamil Idriss. He's watching this play in the remote conflict-ridden town of Diffa, Niger.

Shamil Idriss: Diffa, Niger, may be the most remote place that I've been, ever.

Aza Raskin: The people who brought him there, his colleagues on this project, spent weeks listening to the community talk about the conflicts they're experiencing and the obstacles at play.

Shamil Idriss: We're talking about forced marriage of 12-year-old girls, 13-year-old girls, kids being given by their families because the families need the money. The kids lose all of their education, horrible stuff that was going on.

Aza Raskin: Then they create a performance like this one, that appeals to as many people as possible.

Shamil Idriss: So, I'm sitting there and I'm watching. At the end of the play, the animator gets up and says, can anyone summarize for me what this was about? This girl gets up. I'll never forget. She comes up to the microphone and in this small voice, she starts saying, first explaining mechanically, what happened. And then she gets really impassioned. She's saying: "This is happening now, this isn't a false story. This is happening now, this has happened to friends of mine. I don't want this to happen to me. We have to stop." Her voice gets stronger and stronger. After she puts the microphone down and she's on the verge of tears, everybody clapped. My colleague said: "This is just the beginning of this process now. That play and that performance has opened up something in a way that everybody could hear it. And now our team is going to start working between the religious elders and the tribal leaders and the others to talk about the issue."

Tristan Harris: When societal problems have grown and festered over years and years, it can feel so hard to figure out how to even start a conversation and begin healing. And that's where Shamil and his colleagues come in. The work they do is precise, delicate, and painstaking. Shamil is Chief Executive Officer of the organization, Search for Common Ground, and leads peace-building staff in finding creative ways to resolve conflict all over the world, as well as in the US.

Shamil Idriss: To be clear, these problems of polarization and breakdown of common ground are happening in lots of places around the world. We might as well learn from some of the most difficult areas, but how many technologists are going to Diffa, Niger? How many technologists have even heard of organizations Search for Common Ground?

Aza Raskin: Often as technologists, when we think about solutions, how do we help a society heal? We grab for front door solutions. We need to help people agree more. But when we just put people who have vastly differing opinions together, it's like you're inviting an argument in through the front door. There are all of these cognitive guards waiting to shoot down any idea that forces you to change your identity. So, what I think Shamil brings is a knowledge of how to walk-in through the side doors of conversation, or even better invite the other person home for tea.

Tristan Harris: I'm Tristan Harris.

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

Shamil Idriss: Every person, and every society really needs three things. You need security, you need dignity and you need hope. Those are foundational building blocks of just, healthy societies. They're the core ingredients of both peace and justice. The good news is that these are not zero-sum products. If anything, they're public goods, me getting my security or dignity or hope doesn't mean you have to deplete yours. And in a way, the opposite is true. It's actually, mine can only be assured if you are also getting yours. Martin Luther King's whole, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." How do you build those? I think you really build them on a foundation of trust, trust between people, trust between citizens and their governments. Our work at Search is really fundamentally built around helping people to build trust between each other.

Shamil Idriss: They're critical steps to this. There are a lot of parallels between the interpersonal and the societal level, but if you're just looking at the interpersonal level, it's vitally important to be able to look beneath the label. I think Brian Stevenson just talked about people on death row, are a lot more and a lot more complex than whatever terrible deed they did to land them there. None of us wants to be completely encapsulated by the worst thing we ever said or did, or the most objectionable thing. The first thing is being able to try and look beyond that label. And a lot of times reaching out across difference is hardest in the moment before you do it, the apprehension, the degree to which you've built the other side up into some terrible boogeyman or whatever might be. The first thing is look below that level.

Shamil Idriss: The second key piece is to really invest in that relationship building. We see this in our families. If you get in an argument with a family member, there's a point at which being right or wrong is not necessarily as important as protecting that relationship, right? You want to do both. If you feel strongly about the point, you want to discuss the point, but you also really want to protect that relationship, and you're always holding those two things at the same time. I think a lot of times when we engage with people who aren't in our families or with whom we don't have that baseline of love, it's really easy to attack the person and see the person as the problem. If we can position ourselves in a way that we're attacking the problem and not the person, that's a really big piece of it too. You can think of it metaphorically as move people from sitting across the table, seeing each other as the problem to sitting side by side, looking at a shared problem.

Shamil Idriss: And so to get there, it means you got to build trust between those people. You've got to reframe the issue that divides them in a way that they both feel their perspective on it is captured, in that framing, so they can come to that table equally together with you. Search for Common Ground is a global peacebuilding organization. When we were established back in 1982, the thinking was that we would be 50% domestic and 50% international. And that was the case for the first 15 years or so for the organization. Once we started establishing offices overseas and establishing a track record in the Balkans, in East Africa, right? In Burundi, right after the Rwandan genocide, we start getting a lot more demand for that programming.

Shamil Idriss: And so over time, the work skewed to be mostly international, but we've always maintained domestic work here in the US and frankly, with what's going on right now, we're working hard to expand it.

Tristan Harris: In the US right now, it feels to so many people, including me that we are very much on-the-brink. Maybe just to take people into some examples of your work in some very high risk, high conflict zones around the world, were you able to bring people to some common ground and sit them in the same side of the table?

Shamil Idriss: Yeah. The plane that went down and killed the president of Rwanda, which sparked the genocide there also killed the president of the Burundi and were real worries about the violence that had broken out in Burundi, deteriorating, escalating into the thing that happened in neighboring Rwanda. And you had the same ethnic breakdown between Hutus and Tutsis. One of the things that we were fortunate to find were really courageous Hutu and Tutsi journalists and aspiring journalists, who said, one of the most effective ways that the genocide was prepared for weeks and months in Rwanda was through the media, particularly through the radio. And after the genocide, Radio Mille Collines in Rwanda became, I think it was the first time that an owner of a radio outlet or media outlet got convicted of war crimes at the international tribunal.

Shamil Idriss: But they had the insight that radio can be powerful in that way. It can be just as powerful as a way of inoculating people against hatred and division and building peace. And so they established a radio studio, our team there called, Studio Ijambo, which means wise words. The thing that was key about Studio Ijambo, is it was the first media outlet in that whole great lakes region of Africa, Rwanda, Burundi, democratic Republic of Congo with a multi-ethnic staff team. The team would go out in reporting pairs, Hutu and Tutsi pairs, and they had to protect themselves. There were communities that you could only access if you were a one ethnicity or the other. And so they were protection for one another, but they also as a result produced the most reliable news. It was the journalist in that radio studio that became the stringers for all of the international agencies, the associated press, the Deutsche Welle, all of the major wires around the world.

Shamil Idriss: They expanded from news programming to all other sorts of programming to help build the country back together. The most popular radio show in Burundi for almost 15 years, was the soap opera that they developed with about a Hutu and Tutsi families living side by side, and just the daily issues that would come up between neighbors that always come up, but how they were able to work through them and solve them without coming to blows or without ethnicity coming between them. This program, comedy programming, calling shows, so many different kinds, and they were basically using this tool, but all kinds of creative ways to humanize people across divides and to model a behavior that was non-violent and collaborative, and that really built up that sense of security, dignity, and hope in the country at large.

Shamil Idriss: It was because of that, that that team ended up being recognized by a number of people, including the highest-ranking American diplomat on African affairs at the time with helping to prevent genocide. One of the parallels that I see between Burundi at that time and the US today, the kind of polarization that had set in Burundi, everything became around, about ethnicity. Whereas, if you talk to people individually, they said, there's really nothing essential about the ethnic differences that's rooted in conflict here. But ethnicity had been used particularly by elites to divide people, to gain people's support. And we see that here around politics, I think.

Shamil Idriss: Everything here has become political and politics has become everything, down to mundane things like, what car you drive, what food you eat, whether or not you wear a mask, become signals of political allegiance, when politics actually is not essentially divisive in that way or need-not-be. I think some of those kinds of steps where you look at ways to not just bring people into dialogue with one another, which is essential, but much more important or necessary in addition to dialogue is cooperative action. And in all of our work, we try to move from dialogue to cooperation, and it's really cooperation that builds trust. And the thing that's interesting about common ground, is that it's both static and dynamic. It always exists. It's static. There's always some common ground there.

Shamil Idriss: If a lot of conflict is broken out, if there's been violence, if there's a thirst for vengeance, if things have gotten really bad, that area of common ground might have shrunk a lot. There might not be a lot of things around which you can get people to come together. That's why in a lot of the really severe conflicts where we work, some of the cooperation we foster might seem silly at first. I can't tell you the number of soccer matches we've organized between police forces and youth groups that have been battling it out on the streets during the week, but we'll get together for a soccer tournament on the weekend or community theater performances.

Shamil Idriss: That might be the only way that you can get a divided community to sit together in the town square and watch something, laugh at it and start a conversation around it. But you've got to get something that you can start on as an area of common ground, but it's also dynamic. Once you start doing things together across your dividing lines, the relationships change, and it opens up new areas, unexpected areas for common ground. And eventually it may be able to open up areas for common ground around some of the core drivers of the conflict, the injustices, the imbalances, the grievances, the things that are going on that are really fueling a lot of that conflict to begin with. Critical in our methodology and in moving people from sitting across from one another, to sitting side by side, is starting with dialogue, but looking quickly to where you can get people doing things together, even if at first it might seem irrelevant.

Aza Raskin: What is the timescale that we're talking about? How fast do these things move, and then two, if zoom out, for humans there are the stages of grief that you go through. You can't jump from one to the other. You have to go from each stage to the next. Is there an equivalent stages of healing for countries or communities that are so divided?

Shamil Idriss: I think it's a really good point. On the timeline point, all of the work that we do is intended to not just resolve a specific dispute today or improve a particular relationship between say you and me, to actually trigger more enduring change. In our experience enduring change at the societal level comes in three forms. It either comes in changed institutions, during the Balkans conflict, we piloted inter-ethnic bilingual kindergartens, because one of the things that was clear is that from the youngest ages, ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians were learning different languages, forming separate relationships, following separate media. And that was a recipe for division from the earliest stage-of-life. We piloted these kindergartens, but we made sure they were fantastic kindergartens, high level education. And within a few years, the Macedonian ministry of education took over that model and spread inter-ethnic bilingual kindergartens across the country.

Shamil Idriss: That's an institutional shift, a change that then touches the lives of the entire population or a huge portion of the population, right? Institutional changes and it's not always government institutions. It could be a radio syndicate that decides, you know what, we're going to come together and establish some professional norms of how we're going to cover this issue, so that we don't spark renewed violence in this country. But I can tell you that in many of the places we work as much as we believe in people power, and it is the norm of the day, the government institutions have a huge impact. The way the police comport themselves, is justice actually equally available to everyone? The way the education system runs, the way the healthcare system runs. It doesn't always have to be governmental, but I can tell you that some of it better be for governmental.

Shamil Idriss: The first piece that's key is that institutional change. Second element is a change in social norms, cultural change, the way a critical mass of the population talks about and deals with its differences. That's why our teams around the world, a lot of what they do, we produce hundreds of hours of reality television shows, soap opera programs on radio and TV, things that are intended to spark broader cultural shifts. That team in Burundi, I mentioned to you, I can tell you a quick story as an example. After the war had ended, but where things were still really fraught, the ceasefires are important. Ceasefires aren't justice, but you can't have justice and peace without ceasefires, right? The war had stopped. There was a political dispensation, but there's a taboo about talking about ethnicity.

Shamil Idriss: I remember sitting with a small group of Hutu and Tutsi journalists, and they were brainstorming and they were saying, if you talk to individuals, everyone has stories about people who helped one another across these ethnic divides. I'm only alive today because she hid my mother for two weeks or whatever it might be, these incredible stories. And they said, pretty much everyone has these stories, but nobody talks about them publicly. They had the idea of trying to break that taboo in a very public way. They launched a radio show called, Inkingi Z'Ubuntu, which means pillars of humanity. Very simple half-hour show. We'll just tell the human interest stories, two stories or show of people who had done extraordinary things to help one another.

Shamil Idriss: Within a year of this program, it became so hugely popular. Everyone wanted their stories told, we're getting phone calls in. We were sending cub journalists out to the refugee camps, the refugees whose voices were never heard, it became such a big hit that we were able to hold a huge festival in the largest stadium in the country to celebrate the Inkingi, the pillars of humanity whose stories have been told. So you had Hutu, Tutsi, young, old women and men, illiterate farmers, colonels in the military, all walks of life were being celebrated for this common thing. The president lauded them. This was about two decades ago. And still to this day in Burundi, the word Inkingi, no longer just means pillars.

Shamil Idriss: It still means pillars, like pillar of a building, but it's now an honorific of inter-ethnic solidarity. It's a term that didn't even exist before this simple half hour radio show. That's one example of a shift in social norms, a shift in the way a large part of the population talks about and deals with its differences. The third way that change can become really enduring at that societal level, is through market forces, when there's supply demand and capital, that is resourcing what I might call a peace building intervention, right? Within six months of me taking my current job as the head of Search for Common Ground, we were approached by one of the largest gold mining companies in Africa who had been working with our team for a few years on spot projects.

Shamil Idriss: They originally reached out to them when there had been riots at one of their minds sites, an overzealous security guard had killed a protester. We oftentimes get called in these crisis moments. And so the team had been working with the community and with the mining company and the police force, et cetera, for years off and on, but the company proposed a multi-year partnership. I flew to London to meet the CEO. I said, this is really interesting. Where did this come from? He said, we did an internal study and we found that our use of ammunition at the mine sites, this is mostly non-lethal crowd dispersal, tear gas and rubber bullets and bean bags or whatever sandbags, rather, that it's gone down 98%. The use of ammunition at these mine sites.

Shamil Idriss: And our overall security budget has gone down nearly 60%, but our security results have gone way up, much better relationships with the communities. Community members are reaching out through the channels that have been established proactively. We've had no riots at the mine sites, let alone deaths. It was initially supporting the community to be able to engage on an equal footing.

Tristan Harris: And what did they do in that example? What were the shifts that they made?

Shamil Idriss: With the members of the company? Basic things like replacing a relatively mercenary employed security force with security from the local community members, who were then employed to provide security. Establishing benchmarks and scorecards to hold accountable. The other company that were agreed on what would be provided and how the engagement with the community would be. Establishing channels of communication and complaint. Also working with the police force, which was sometimes the governments, these are supposed to be the neutral providers, but sometimes are not. It was in a number of systems that were set up, platforms that were set up, but fundamentally relationships and trust that was built over time, that enabled grievances to be addressed and shared interests to be identified and, and pursued.

Shamil Idriss: But I was answering that question about how long does this take? If you look at change at that level, if you look at change at the level of, how long does it take to change an institution, like a ministry or a police force? Or to establish a new social norm or to give rise to new market forces? In our experience, and we've looked at our own case studies for this, not always, but most of the time it takes a good eight to 10 years and not less. You can generate results faster. You can resolve a specific dispute, you can improve a particular relationship. And there are times when you can move faster, there are times when that moves slower, but the critical thing is that piece moves at the speed of trust and trust can't be fast-tracked. These things have to go through phases and trust takes time to be built, but can also be destroyed so fast.

Shamil Idriss: You can take a year or decades building trust. And if you have a few weeks of all out violence, that trust goes back to zero and sometimes for a full generation.

Tristan Harris: One of the things that I heard you talk about in different interviews have given, is inter-ethnic solidarity as being a huge taboo, that actually there is inter-ethnic solidarity or inter-party solidarity or people who are willing to have conversations with people across the divide, or even say, well, actually let me empathize with those people who are there on January 6th. What was going on for them? What was true for them in the way that they saw the world, that they would do something that I would see as so horrific? But then one of the things you're bringing up is the fact that to even do that act of empathy in a set of conditions where people almost feel like the other side doesn't deserve our generous assumptions right now.

Tristan Harris: They have already proven that there's just no room for that because of this long list of the grievances and balance sheet of evidence I've seen on social media, that says that I shouldn't even reach out for that. And so when you have those groups that are willing to go across or let me try to understand their perspective, or maybe there's something to their perspective, it's not just that they will get into a fight with the other side, it's that their own tribe will come after them for even making that move. How do you actually get across some of these invisible types, that don't even go the way that our common narratives say they go, that really it's about building a bridge with the other side, when maybe it's actually building a bridge with my own side, so that we even have our own more generous place to come from, that's more empathetic?

Shamil Idriss: There's a couple of really important insights in what you're sharing. And I think it's oftentimes the case. A lot of people do ask me and my colleagues, hey, how can I get into peace building and this kind of thing? Oftentimes I encourage people if they want to be reaching across divides, whatever those divides might be, that there are two really good internal steps to take before you go to those external steps, right? Of outreach. One is to get really clear in yourself. What are the lines that you're not willing to cross, right? What are the principles that you're going to stand on? Violence is an easy one, I would hope. I'm not going to commit violence, but beyond physical violence, I refuse to insult the dignity of somebody else, just because I want to make my point, that kind of stuff. Get really clear on and ground yourself in your own principles.

Shamil Idriss: What are the principles that you want to define, the way that you engage with others? The golden rule is always helpful to me and I think to a lot of people, how do I want to be engaged with, that's how I'm going to engage others no matter who they are. I think the second step that is before you reaching out across those dividing lines, is to try to have somewhat of a support base, because as you've just said, oftentimes the biggest blow back comes from people's own tribe, that ethnic trader or that political trader, or how dare you reach out across those divides. And so having people around you who will support you, who understand why you're doing it and will support you through the high times and the low times, I think it was really important. There's also just some humility, I think, that's involved.

Shamil Idriss: I find it hard enough just to be a good person on my own and take care of the things within my own world. That quickness with which we're willing to judge others based on maybe three seconds of a video of what I've seen them do, or a quote that I heard them say, there's just a lot of, I think there's a lot of self-righteousness there, and it can be helpful to check that because it can be really negative place to be all the time. But I think it's really important to have a support base if you're going to do this outreach, and it doesn't have to be in complicated, just be a couple of friends or family member too, just people who are going to support you as you do that kind of outreach.

Shamil Idriss: I think the other thing that can be helpful to remember, is that, people are really complex. You may not agree with my notion of human nature, but I have a strong sense of fair, but for a few things go high. If you inject enough fear into a population, it's extraordinary how quickly they will turn on some of the very principles and break some of the very laws that they established. The internment camps during world war II here in the States. We can go through history time and time again, and there were sacrosanct laws and even cultural norms that very quickly got completely subverted and broken, because enough fear was injected into societies. You inject enough of that fear and insecurity and people do extraordinary things and shocking things.

Shamil Idriss: And so, yeah, I think if it's possible to separate out the person from the act, that makes a really big difference. You can be completely opposed to somebody's position or to something that they've done or something they've said, but not allow that to make you close off to the person behind all of those things and try and understand where they're coming from.

Tristan Harris: How do you rekindle innocence in people who are trying to bridge divide? I think you mentioned the example of having children be the journalists who were interviewing people in post-conflict zones, because if a child is asking the police sheriff or the minister of defense questions about these really awful things that are happening, they're coming from a space of just utter curiosity and openness, and it's clear you wouldn't respond with hatred or vilification or things like that. I wonder about those mechanisms to bootstrap innocence and bootstrap decency, so that someone who's saying, hey, I'm going to cross the divide here and I don't want to just be killed or attacked for doing so.

Shamil Idriss: Our teams around the world have innovated a few different ways to try, I like the way you use that, rekindle that innocence, or open up the possibility of engagement across differences. Our team in Nepal broadcast a TV drama that was hugely popular there, Singha Durbar, which meant the lion's palace, but it was about the first female prime minister, fictitious female prime minister in the country. And just told the story of how she ruled in a very patriarchal society and inspired thousands of women to get interested in politics. One way to do it is through storytelling and drama that is not pollyannaish, but connected to reality. Another way is through trusted sources that can include young people in Sierra Leone and Liberia. I think the story that you're alluding to under Charles Taylor's regime in Liberia, there was a lot of oppression and censorship for the media.

Shamil Idriss: And strangely there was more censorship of print media than radio, even though radio was a lot more powerful, maybe because there was a paper trail, but in dictatorships, is always the case. There are weird openings over here, and other things closed over there. The team there, the idea of establishing a program by children, but not just for children for the whole country called, Golden Kids News and trained cub journalists, twelve-year-old journalists to go out and do interviews and record the news basically, this radio station. It became hugely popular. This was a radio outlet called, Talking Drum Studio. The same thing was modeled in Sierra Leone and years later, Michael Sambola, is the most feared and respected investigative journalist in that country.

Shamil Idriss: He's got between 700,000 and one million listeners every day on his program in Sierra Leone, and contributed directly to that country's transition away from war to now it's been ranked I think the third most peaceful country in Africa, the 14th least militarized country in the world. They would ask questions of colonels in the military that an adult journalist could never get away with. They will not only ask them, but they'd get answers. People would respond to them. You can use dramatic storytelling. You can use trusted sources. The team in Burundi was using the inter-ethnic teams where their people would trust somebody from their own community, whereas they wouldn't trust somebody from the other community.

Shamil Idriss: And then those two journalists would come together and try to tell one story from the things they try to sift through what they were hearing to tell the truth of what had actually happened. There are a lot of different ways to re rekindle that. You can't divorce the information from the source. The source becomes really important. Is it a trusted source? I do think we have to remember that this notion of centralized factual, relatively objective, even the pre-cable news days in the US where there were three television stations, or Walter Cronkite, that's actually the anomaly in human history.

Shamil Idriss: Most of human history, reliable information was determined by who the source was and people trusted the elder, or they trusted the people in the town who had established a track record for that trust. Looking for what others trusted sources, and if there is not one trusted source, because things have become so fractured, is there a way to bring those different trusted sources together to be telling stories together? If it's too touchy to do that on news programming, maybe you can do something with dramatic storytelling or something that begins to move the needle and rebuild a sense of a common narrative for people and trusted sources.

Shamil Idriss: A lot of times we jump to the big national issues, the big national debates, and relationships tend to get transformed at the local community level where people have some vested interests. They're sending their kids to the schools, they have their jobs there, whatever. I think we have to come back together again at that level. And at that level, you can find a lot of shared concerns. It might be a shared concern with access to resources. It might be a shared concern about what's going on in the school system. There are all kinds of things that make up the building blocks of these bigger debates that we have, that play out at the local community level.

Shamil Idriss: And right now I think people are really subsumed into getting into the big national debates, oftentimes in social media platforms, where they're anonymized and how they're engaging with it, and a lot less respectful. I think the other piece that is important to understand is the power that you have as an individual through the respect that you grant or withhold from someone else. We did a lot of work in the field of virtual exchanges, combining interactive technologies and video conferencing platforms with the pedagogy for cross-cultural education and trying to figure out how could you maybe scale up respectful cross-cultural dialogue or dialogue across difference.

Shamil Idriss: We continue to do this with our virtual exchange partners, Soliya, this organization that we partner with. We had been working for years with MIT and then U Penn neuroscientists to test the results and the impact of this programming. One of the insights that we got from this, is the critical threshold experience for people to go through in order to become much more willing and constructive participants in a diverse group. It was the experience of being heard and respected, not necessarily being agreed with, but if you say something incredibly offensive to me and you expect that maybe I'll shut you down or whatever. My response is I totally disagree with you, I'm even offended by what you just said, but I want to understand where you're coming from. Have you had personal experiences that made you feel this way?

Shamil Idriss: Where do you get your information from? Where do I get mine from? And that conversation. Once someone passes through that threshold of being heard and respected, even if they're disagreed with, they tend to be a much more constructive participant in that group, they ask more questions, they're less willing to support violence or nastiness, against the other side or whatever it might be. Sort of been thinking about the intersection of peacebuilding and technology and particularly interactive platforms, and wondered, is there a way, if that was the metric, if the experience we were trying to maximize is the experience of being heard and respected, how could we build platforms or interventions that would scale up that as the core?

Shamil Idriss: More so than likes or follows or retweets or whatever else, or even just eyeballs, but just that core experience of being heard and respected, because that is really the critical point for people in which they feel safer, more welcoming communities, even when they're diverse communities, where their views are not in the majority.

Tristan Harris: And did you see that happen in these virtual exchanges that you ran? Did this only happen physically, people building that sense of trust and respect? Because you've been running these digital exchanges for multiple decades. It's not just a recent post-pandemic Zoom thing. Right?

Shamil Idriss: Yeah, no, this came out of actually the 9/11 attacks and somebody who was a producer at that time for ABC News and was in charge of what, at that time it was called, Convergence, which was, how do we take these newly developed interactive media technologies and integrate them into the news programming to engage the audience more? This guy, my friend, Lucas Welch quit his job after 9/11. He was so disillusioned by the way that the news media was portraying what was happening and only showing the worst of different communities, he felt it was driving us further apart around the world, that he decided he wanted to use these technologies that he knew something about to actually bring people together.

Shamil Idriss: And in some ways, subvert the mainstream media impact that was being had. And so develop this approach, basically connecting young adults across the US and eventually Western Europe with their peers and Muslim majority countries for small group dialogue. And so this insight really came entirely out of that online space. The critical piece was connecting the access of the platform with the pedagogy, a really sound facilitation. And that's a tough thing to mechanize, automate, the art of facilitation. This is a synchronous live video conference round table platform. It's meant to look and feel a round table dialogue with a chat box in the middle, so that the facilitator can help track things.

Shamil Idriss: There's always a highly trained facilitator in the room. Technically the only person who can interrupt anyone is the facilitator. And these are multiple sessions with the same group because it takes time to build trust. And in the first session, what you do with the group is what you would do, if you're building a team, you don't jump into the issues, you don't jump right into, so what do you think of the Israeli Palestinian conflict, right? If you're doing a dialogue between American students and students across the Arab world, there are 100 games you can choose. You can say, you know what, we're going to spend the next two hours, our whole first session, I want everybody to think about three elements of your identity.

Shamil Idriss: Three things that define who you are, that can be really profound. You're an Orthodox Jew, or they could be light. You're a Yankees fan, whatever. You're one of 10 kids, whatever it is. And then I want you to pick one of them that you want to share with the group at some length. You're going to share all three, but then you're going to talk at length about one of them. And so you spend the whole two hours going around the group with each of the eight to 10 young people doing that. By the end, what's happened is, without you having to teach somebody in some didactic way, hey, we all have multiple identities. Nobody is reduceable to one identity or one thing they said or did, but also that our multiple identities intersect and all kinds of interesting and complex ways here.

Shamil Idriss: Oh my God, you're a mother in this evangelical Christian household in Texas is also pushing you to get married young? I thought that only happened here in Gaza, all these different interactions, you like that music to et cetera. That's what the platform is and how the programming starts. You can automate certain things. You can have a talking stick and everybody goes for X amount of time, there are other things you can, but automating in any way, the scalable way, really effective facilitators is tough. But we absolutely did see that when somebody said, I don't think the September 11th attacks happened the way you think they did. I think the US and Israel planned them. Or somebody else said, I don't think that extremism or violence is a fringe phenomenon in Islam. I think your religion is more violent than mine.

Shamil Idriss: They'd say these things that were incredibly offensive to the other side, and frankly, unfortunately, we continue to get very mainstream views across those communities, but oftentimes don't get talked about. When the response was rather than being shut down, I totally disagree with you, but I do want to understand where you're coming from and digging into, especially when people started seeing the way in which their views can be manipulated easily and who benefits from their views being manipulated, they form a lot stronger sense of solidarity and human connection. And then the next time that something would happen in the news that before they might've filtered through one lens, now they were starting to filter it through this trusted source they had established on the, quote unquote, other side.

Shamil Idriss: We've seen that time and again, with that programming, that Soliya runs, our virtual exchange partner. We're now applying that domestically in the US to college orientation. The US college is still for a lot of kids here, is the most diverse community they've been a part of by the time they move on to the campus. And it's also one of the ground zeros for the polarization happening in this country, at-large. We've introduced what we call first year connect, which is an orientation program where every student coming into a college in the summer before they get onto campus, they're broken up into these groups of eight to 10 peers, specifically across the dividing lines that are pulling the country apart, along politics, race, et cetera, for these multiple facilitated sessions. So that by the time they get onto campus, they've really had some real breakthroughs with one another. And they're really interested to connect with one another along the very lines they might've self-segregated against otherwise.

Aza Raskin: As I dove into your work, it rose in my mind, this provocation of how would we design technology, social media, to better privilege or facilitate being heard and being seen. And so my mind immediately started to run into solutions of like, all right, when I'm heard or seen, it's when the person I'm talking to reflect backs what they've heard in their own words in a different way, and wouldn't it be amazing if Twitter acted more like this. I'm like, but I actually don't know if that would really work. Could those kinds of longer, more cognitively intensive processes, out-compete the likes and the retweets and the quick shares. And it seemed really hard and maybe even questioned, like, is tech the right medium for any of this stuff? Can it be done?

Aza Raskin: It's like, it's trying to have maybe a really intimate conversation with someone over really bad wifi, and you're starting to get into it. You're saying the thing I love most about, and then it's just like, I'm sorry, I couldn't hear you. Could you start again? I lost you, you just can't do it. [crosstalk 00:33:52]. Yeah, exactly. I love what you're... what? Sorry. And you tell the story, I think in your 2011 talk, it was a TED talk of pushing this kid named Eric, poor Eric, down some stairs, and having a waking-up moment of feeling deep shame.

Aza Raskin: One, I think that's an interesting story to tell, and two if that had happened on social media, would the part of yourself, that human nature of having to see someone feel that kind of pain, ever even been awoken in the first place? And you called out in 2011, that TV and radio, these massive information connection technologies, precedents the bloodiest century in human history. And in 2011, you're saying, hey, maybe social media, isn't going to be a panacea. I'd love to hear your reflections on how our new information technologies have affected your work, whether it's possible in a text based medium or a low bandwidth medium to do the work that's required.

Shamil Idriss: One of the things that happens through those kinds of virtual exchanges. And this is one I'm curious about in the tech world is, there's a learning arc, right? And learning arcs, the most profound learning arcs require a period of discomfort. You actually need to go through that discomfort of the cognitive dissonance or the time where you can't figure something out, or you're going to get a little nervous. Can I say this in front of him? I don't know. And on the other end of it, when it's facilitated well, the pay off is huge, people like it, and they want more of it. One of the questions I have that goes back to Aza's question around, can we replicate this tough in the social media space is, you guys know this space much better than me, but it seems to me everything around social media is about reducing the discomfort.

Shamil Idriss: It's around making things as easy and quick as possible. It's like a quick fix, but what I'm talking about is, still has a real payoff. In fact, in many ways, it's a much deeper fix, people love those breakthroughs. Once they have the breakthrough across those dividing lines, where they feel they've come to understand somebody and really enjoy somebody that they were fearful of or distrusted, they love it. They want more of that. It's no accident that when we run this program now for almost two decades, after every year that we do it, about a third of the young people who go through it, volunteer to become facilitators, because they love, they've never seen somebody facilitate a dialogue like that. They're used to people teaching them the facts, standing in front of a classroom and just telling them what to think.

Shamil Idriss: But they've seen somebody who instead of taking a position, helped a diverse group of people understand and connect with each other better and they love that. And so they volunteer to become facilitator. So, yeah, Aza, I think that question that you're asking is a question mostly we've thrown back to you guys, is that, I think part of the thing with peacebuilding is, there is some apprehension, there is some challenge to it. It's not a quick fix, but the fix when it happens is such a huge pay off, the people actually really enjoy it and they feel safer, they like that space. I imagine there are spaces, there are social media platforms that have norms that have been established and enforced of respect and engagement, but also have diversity of participation. I imagine those are pretty rich and meaningful places, but they're not the dominant ones in our social media world, for sure.

Aza Raskin: What are the other common pitfalls or failure modes or the ideas that seem really good at the outset, I remember you saying in a couple of your talks that, when you got to Swarthmore, you tried to set up a group to bridge Palestinians and Israelis. And they ended up leading people to be more angry. At the end, what can we learn from all the ways that you've tried to bring people together, but that have counter-intuitively failed? I know the one that you have brought up, is that, if you ask people to empathy across the divide with the other side, but you don't feel that your site is being heard or it's in a weaker position, that backfires.

Shamil Idriss: I think power dynamics are hugely important. I don't think, when we're talking about reaching out across dividing lines, I think power needs to be understood. Course of power in particular, there's a lot of different kinds of power. There's power in the masses. There's power in human connections, but we would never, for instance, that's Search for Common Ground, we never pushed people to connect across dividing lines, without having some understanding of the power dynamics. We build teams that themselves represent the dividing lines that they want to bridge. And then they work together to try and figure out, in this context, given the realities, what can we do here that might build trust, and certainly do no harm.

Shamil Idriss: We did a lot of work between the United States and Iran, former secretary of state Kerry, and the foreign minister of Iran Zarif, publicly acknowledged and thanked us for the contributions we made to the Iran nuclear deal back in 2015, 2016. But that work could have actually been 20 years in the running. And the very first thing that we did, we were struggling. We had Iranian and American experts and diplomats, former diplomats thinking together, what could we do given the power dynamics here? There's a strong feeling in Iran of dominance of the US and not wanting to be dominated. What can we do?

Shamil Idriss: And this was in the time where no Americans had set foot in Iran since the 1979 revolution. We were trying to think of, is there a way that we could bring Americans back in a very public way, but in a way that wouldn't feel like a threat? What they came up with was wrestling. Now, wrestling in Iran, it's more than the national pastime. The mythology is about great wrestlers. Wrestling is huge in Iran, and Iranian wrestlers are as good as anyone in the world. If there's anyone that can compete with the Americans in wrestling, it's the Iranian. We said, you know what, what if we were able to get the American Olympic wrestling team to go to Iran, to participate in the major, the Takhti Cup, the major wrestling tournament there.

Shamil Idriss: We were able to get them to go, to do that. It's a great story, because I remember talking to the American Olympic gold medal, winning heavyweight wrestler, huge dude, I'm forgetting his name now. He said, we showed up in Iran, we landed, the only time that the plane you could get there, was a two o'clock in the morning arrival in Tehran. And there were all these people, there were a couple of hundred people there. And they knew my name. He was like, I'm the American heavyweight, no Americans know my name. But in Iran, people actually knew me, were welcoming there. And so that wrestling tournament was, yes, it was a wrestling tournament, but behind the scenes, a lot of groundwork had been laid, President Clinton at the time had the Olympic wrestling team into the oval office upon their return.

Shamil Idriss: That was a direct signal at the political level, that there was an interest in dialogue. There were other things going on behind the scenes, but it had to be a venue of engagement that put the Iranians and the Americans on some equal footing. You can look in similar cases down at the community level. If you can do something between police and community and the community is feeling really not only underserved, but victimized by the police, you've got to come up with a way of figuring out how can you bring these communities together, where they're going to be safe, truly safe, where their dignity is not going to be trampled on. And that might be, it could be a basketball tournament, could be a community theater performance that brings them together. It could be any number of things.

Shamil Idriss: But power is really important. So pushing people to reach across dividing lines, without paying any attention to the power that's there, is a disastrous mistake. And similarly tied to that, you can't do this from afar. You have to do this in consultation and with the leadership really coming from the communities themselves, where they can say, you know what, if you do that, you'll never be trusted here again. Or you know what, if you do that, everybody's going to show up. That's why it's really helpful when you're doing this work, to have people in the planning of it and the strategizing of it who represent the very communities you're trying to bring together. If I'm trying to figure out how in the tech space, I'm going to be connecting people across, the first thing place I'd go is, well, what are the communities I'm trying to connect?

Shamil Idriss: Let me get them into the room together. Let's start strategizing together. What would work? What wouldn't work? What would be a no-go zone? That's how you start the process. The harder thing is, oftentimes people don't have relationships across the dividing lines that will enable them to do this. The number of police forces we work with around the world who are engaged in brutal crackdowns, and when you talk to, you get to the police chief, or you talk to people in the police force, they would actually prefer to be respected and esteemed and looked out and reached out to proactively by the community. They'd rather not be hated and despised, but in many of the cases, they don't have those relationships, but sometimes they're being put in situations to police communities that are the victims of decades of terrible policies and other things, so they're in a pretty difficult position themselves.

Shamil Idriss: And so they tend to respond with what they know, which is force first and cracking heads or whatever it might be. When you can open up the relationships and they're able to sit side by side and build enough of a relationship with people in the community that they can start talking honestly about, God, what do we do about this? The security situation in this community is a mess or the drugs or whatever it might be. Our team in Nigeria has done a lot of that work, in a lot of countries we do this work where we bring together community and police forces together, where the police themselves aren't able to maintain security to begin with, but working together with the communities, they can do a lot better, but only if that baseline of trust is there. A lot of the anthropology, is really around the basics of building enough trust with people in each community, who have some constituents, who have some following that they can start crafting ideas together.

Shamil Idriss: They'll come up with much better ideas than any outsider will or even a mediator will. Once they're sitting on the same side of the table, they're going to come up with stuff you never would've thought of. I remember when my first visit to Kyrgyzstan, our team there, Kyrgyzstan is a country that had gone really the furthest in democratic reforms in that region. Our director there invited me to dinner the first night. He said, I'm going to invite the advisory board that I set up once we got here. The advisory board is made up of people from all walks of life in Kyrgyzstan. Some of whom had never really engaged with one another until they'd been invited to advise our team there. It included the police chief of Bishkek, the capital city, and the top religious, the top Imam, the chief Mufti from the Muslim community on the advisory team.

Shamil Idriss: They were sitting across from me and next to me at the dinner. I was asking them about their work with us. They told me the story, they said, we had real issues. We were trying to deal with violent extremism and we were looking at the religious community as being part of the problem, because they were not helping us to identify this scourge, to root it out. And the representative, the grand Mufti who was there, said, and our problem was we were very distressful to the police, they were putting plants in the mosques to try and investigate people. They were oftentimes pulling people out without due process, whatever. But he said, once they started really talking, the two of them, about what was going on, and the police realized that the religious leadership was really distraught by extremism.

Shamil Idriss: There were outside extremist groups, recruiting young people, vulnerable young people from their communities. They did not want that happening. They felt the police were just making it worse, because the things that the police were doing were just making the young people more angry and more vulnerable to this extremism. And the religious leaders felt caught in the middle. They came up with ideas and they both took leadership. The police captain developed a training program that then got rolled out across the police force on outreach to communities. He started doing outreach during the Holy month of Ramadan, visiting for the break fast meal, visiting the ethnic communities, where they the police had least relationships and use that as the beginning of the relationship building.

Shamil Idriss: He urged the rest of the police in every city, in town, to be considering that kind of outreach, and the grand Mufti developed this handbook and training for Imams and other religious leaders, how to identify and deal with the generation gap and the vulnerability of young people in their communities to outside extremist influence, this kind of thing. This only came up really, these ideas came up through their interacting with one another. And so when we get back to how do you do this stuff online and whatever? People love it once they get into these kinds of relationships. It's not, yes, there must be some dopamine fix when they insult each other and never get to know one another online, and they're just insulting, basically labels they have for one another.

Shamil Idriss: But our experience is that people have a much more profound, positive experience when they have these breakthrough relationships and they start problem solving together on stuff that's been dividing their community. They love that. I don't know how you scale that up, frankly, in the online space, but I think that's the critical piece, is getting those people who might not trust one another sitting on the same side of the table facing that common problem.

Aza Raskin: How do you prioritize? How do you know which interventions are the most powerful to do? Because I'd imagine you have a limited budget, you have limited time and you're sitting there trying to figure out which of these 10 brilliant ideas we should do. How do you know which ones are right? What is that process like?

Shamil Idriss: I think this is also where local leadership is really important. People who will say, you know what, if we work with that person, and that person is both open and has a real constituency. So let's work with that person. Or you know what, there are 50 things that have to get done, but if that ministry budges, everyone else will follow. Those things aren't obvious from the outside. And they shift from the inside. Our founder, my predecessor in my role, John Marks, he used the quote Napoleon. I don't know if this is even true. It's not great for a peace building organization, maybe to be quoting Napoleon. But apparently, this may be apocryphal. I don't know if he actually said this, but apparently he was asked how he was so successful in battle, that, oh, gee, you must plan for every eventuality and have contingency plans for everything.

Shamil Idriss: Supposedly, according to John, Napoleon said, "No, no, no, no. [foreign language 00:46:19]." You have to engage first and then you see the possibilities. Within complex systems, you have to get yourself in the middle of them, and then you'll see when the opportunities open up. There is no perfect plan from the outside. Another maybe violent metaphor for a peace building organization, I think it was Mike Tyson who said. "Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the face." I think part of the thing is, when you go into conflict settings with a truly open heart and you grant the respect and the dignity to every member of that community, both of those who are being victimized by power structure, but you're even willing to open your ears and listen to the police captain. Why does he think the police are acting this way?

Shamil Idriss: What's going on with them? When you go in with that kind of openness, oftentimes possibilities will open up. People have been looking for that or waiting for that or hoping for something like that, the opportunities will open up, that you wouldn't have predicted. Sometimes it takes time to come upon the ones that will be really strategic and could really flip a much bigger switch. The thing not to do is to wait from the outside for the perfect plan, get involved in doing it and things will open up and people will be drawn to you more and more. That's one of the things that I find that I'm so inspired by with the peers that I work with around the world. I have the privilege to represent them and a lot of them risk a lot to do the work that they're doing.

Shamil Idriss: Some of them have risked their lives. Others just, they risk their reputations, because as we've talked about earlier, it's their own communities who are oftentimes trying to pull them apart. One of the things that is most consistently said, is that they love having a place to hope. And being hopeful and being naive are two very different things, right? I'm not talking about a hope divorced from the realities of the power imbalances and the things that are going wrong. But being intentional about the fact that there is a way out of this, we're going to find it, and we have just as much power to bring it about as anyone else does. That's a key part of the DNA of our work at Search for Common Ground. And so once you get yourself involved in doing this, you'll find all kinds of opportunities will come to you, that you might not have expected.

Shamil Idriss: I think if you look at this country right now, in the US, we're in a pretty dark period right now in terms of polarization, but I'm already seeing, I'm sure you are too, all kinds of initiatives, that are very good things will come out of this, because a lot of people have been woken up to just how divided we've become and they don't like it. And so whether it's the work of braver angels or courageous conversations or cure violence, break bread together, all these groups, some of which have been toiling in the wilderness for years without being acknowledged, or they've just cropped up, I think you're going to see a lot more of those efforts. I think over time, we'll see some of them really hit on really strategic ways of hopefully bringing about those changes in institutions, in social norms or in markets. And we too at Search [for Common Ground] are committed to doing this here in the States.

Tristan Harris: Now taking all those lessons and looking at the United States right now, we're looking at a layer cake that was built over a 10 year process, building foundation upon foundation of confirmation bias of a caricature, a mockery of the other side that reveals the maximum hypocrisy of what their views, why their views should not be respected or that they should be held with any dignity. When you really think about applying these lessons to how you would do a full takeover of something like a Facebook or a Twitter or Instagram or a YouTube, to try to do this, what would you do? Before we get there, let me also just share a story.

Tristan Harris: We often reference in this podcast, in our past work, persuasive technology and Stanford, Professor B.J. Fogg, who actually worked on teaching many of the alumni of Stanford classes, that then went on to found Instagram and found including myself and many other people and applying these lessons of what makes technology more persuasive. People often think of that lab as doing these evil things. It really wasn't that way at all. One thing that B.J. is not as well known for, is his whole peace initiative. He actually created something called, Persuasive Technology for Peace. And so it's funny, in today's world, Facebook connecting people across divides, reminds me of your class at Swarthmore, where you got those Israelis and Palestinians together, but it actually, it doesn't produce harmony and produces more division, because we didn't get the other parameters right.

Tristan Harris: In the early days of Facebook, Professor B.J. Fogg, successfully got several tech companies to launch something called, peace dot. This was the web address, like peace.facebook.com. He got CouchSurfing to be a part of it, peace.couchsurfing.com. He got a couple other groups to be a part of it. The idea was what if you could standardize for every company, every business, every technology, digital application, every organization set up what their persuasive efforts towards more global piece would look like, in the case of Facebook, it was actually a newsfeed, a list of the most recent friend connections being added between Israelis and Palestinians.

Tristan Harris: I think you had a clicker, so you could go between and see different conflict zones and see new friend connections between these at-risk countries. That was a really inspiring thing. You're just seeing these new friend connections. If you think about Facebook at that time, you also notice that, it was mostly young people, it was actually, I think just, maybe almost just college students coming online at that time. Maybe it depends on which year this was. I'm not sure. But you can imagine a more youth oriented version or adoption of Facebook in those conflict ridden countries being possibly more peace oriented, because you don't have demographics and historical grievances.

Tristan Harris: I think as you said, in one of your interviews, young people in general are very, are much more optimistic or want more peace in the world. I use this as an example because there actually is a long lineage to thinking about how, and this is a very simple example, but when you think about that not just being peace.facebook.com, but you think about that being facebook.com. What is the total revamp, the different way of thinking about this, that we might start to explore?

Shamil Idriss: I think there's an element of this where within the existing Facebook user group and other platforms as well, there are how many thousands of trained facilitators, peacebuilders, people who actually, if you could bring their talents to bear and actually amplify their talents, incentivize or provide opportunities for them to apply their talents, you could pretty quickly say, you know what, for people who are certified with that skillset and that commitment, they get a certain plugin. Where they can immediately find out the 20 people, 30 people who feel strongest about X issue and disagree about it within a certain radius, and we're going to provide them with a way to quickly invite those people into a process, facilitate that.

Shamil Idriss: There are probably a million ways that you could empower and equip the community, forming the community glue type people who already have that skill set, to bring that skill set, to bear in the social media space. I'd love to see that happen. I think on the youth front, this is by far the largest youth cohort in human history, under 25 year olds globally. Young people just are very resistant to swallow the divisions that their older generations try to pass down on them. The racial divisions, whatever the divisions are. They tend to have a real strong impetus and will to change things.

Shamil Idriss: I think if you can provide channels and supports for young people to do that, resources, training, I think mobilizing youth core, a global youth core, we haven't seen, peace moments, usually crop up in response to specific Wars in specific places we haven't seen, but I really think we're going to see, and I think in my lifetime and unprecedentedly powerful global youth movement for peace, with the connections that are being made now in social media and providing some opportunities and support nodes for young people to mobilize that, to organize themselves, to get training and how you actually apply collaborative approaches to problem solving, how you bridge divides, on the issues they care about.

Shamil Idriss: Not trying to get them to care about things they don't care about, but take the stuff that you care about, and here's a way that you can drive change on it, that doesn't drive a wedge in society at the same time. I think celebrating models is hugely important, finding ways to reward and award people for behaviors to incentivize others, I think is critically important. But I do have to say, I think on the flip side of all of this, there's got to be some enforcement of standards. With all the stuff that I'm talking about, what I'd love to see, I just feel if we don't have some of that also coming on the backend or some parameters that are being set and enforced, it's going to be really difficult to reverse the trajectory that we're on.

Shamil Idriss: But my hope really comes from the fact that we are better connected than ever, that we do have a huge youth cohort, and that we do know more now about building peace than we ever have before. It is as much art as science. So there's not a totally clear formula, here's the three steps you have to take, but we know enough now that I think we could support and equip people to apply those talents and those skills in the online space.

Tristan Harris: There's a few things you mentioned just to review, because I think they're each interesting. You can imagine from a product design hat lens, how would you implement something like that? One is, okay, who are the moderators who have that special training, who know how to have those conversations? And can they be given almost instead of the blue check mark, they're given the peace check mark? And the peace check mark means that you have this privileged feed access. You see some of the highest conflict things. You pick interest areas, Twitter, Facebook, et cetera, show you here's the areas of really big fights that are going on right now, and invite you into a way of inviting those people into a different process. I'm imagining to combine that idea with the other idea of the youth and the golden, you called them, the Golden Kids?

Shamil Idriss: Yeah. Golden Kids News.

Tristan Harris: Imagine some exponential version of that, right? So now let's imagine kids who are on different platforms, it could be TikTok, it could be Twitter, it could be Facebook, et cetera. Kids may be of different political families, and then they're paired together, and then they're invited into a process to innocently interview these top people, like the head of the oath keepers, the head of the proud boys, the head of the Antifa groups or whatever. And actually have this really innocent dialogue with them and record that and broadcast that, I think programs like, I think Stanley McChrystal, others talk about a national civilian corps, right? Having one year of duty of service to country, to public service, to public benefit, where you're put into some program where with lots of people who are very different from you, so that we start creating the more of that mycelium network of trust across different divides.

Tristan Harris: I'm just thinking you apply that lesson to technology, maybe before you land on Facebook or any of these new social media platforms. The first two hours you are brought into this process where you, like you said, share different parts of your identity with people who are very different from you. There's almost an orientation to how we enter into these social products. I'm imagining to apply that and make that very real. You go into Zoom, Zoom right now, they have these buttons, new call, schedule call, whatever, right? They can have one right there being like, hey, for your country, basically, there's a way to join a group that will have some conversation that's moderated. It could be just literally a button in the main UI, that when everyone launches Zoom in a daily basis, living at pandemic, could start inviting people into processes like that.

Tristan Harris: I'm not trying to be second utopian and think that this can solve magically the problems, but I want to get everyone thinking about how you would start to take these lessons and then reorient the geometry of these social networks, so that they mirror some of the lessons that we're talking about right now.

Shamil Idriss: We started out talking about how some of the things that everybody needs, like security, dignity, and hope, that these are public goods, that my having them doesn't mean you have less of them. Right? I think what you're talking about, part of what's going on, is that we're really hurting. People are hurting. They don't feel they have all three or even any of these right now. That lack of security, that lack of dignity, that lack of hope, these are subjective things, we can step back and say, there's a difference between disenfranchisement and feeling like your privileges are being pulled away, privileges that you may never have had to begin with. We can have that conversation. That's an important conversation. This is where some of the power dynamics come in.

Shamil Idriss: But at the end of the day, in terms of where human beings are, people don't have one or all three of that sense of security, dignity, and hope. They're hurting. And they act out of that hurt, out of that emotional space. And so the project here is, I'm listening to you talk about those things, is less about, to be honest with you, I think it's less about bridge building for bridge building sake. And it's more around, we want to commit to building this security, dignity and hope for all of us. Because I know that not only does your having it not take away from mine, but actually I can only be assured of mine if you also have yours. And we're in a space right now where a lot of people don't feel that they've got it.

Shamil Idriss: And so the project is really around how can we use these technologies to start building some of the trust between us, to establish those things, and find out from each other, what would it take for you to feel secure, to feel that you are respected and had the dignity that all people deserve and to feel hopeful about the future? What would it be? I think especially if put to young people, especially if put the young people, I think that question would generate all kinds of initiatives that would be mind blowing and could be world changing.

Tristan Harris: I watched one of the interviews you gave with your wife, who studies far right extremism, is that right?

Shamil Idriss: Yeah.

Tristan Harris: And she was talking about, in that interview, how people think that unemployment is directly connected to far right extremism, but it was actually, at least as she said, parents who had unemployment, it was more of the trauma of the past lineage, which is to your point about this being more of a psychological phenomenon, that when you have a trauma, it makes it harder to envision these longer term, to relate to long-term future visions of what could happen because you're living in this short-term precarity of what could go wrong. I think I can relate to this in my own life. When I heard about this in your work and your wife's comment about the family lineage of precarity, of the unemployment, of the financial crisis, that that kind of `thing, even if you're employed can drive you there. And so I think this is all back to, if security is a psychological construct, what does it take psychologically to feel safe?

Shamil Idriss: One of the reasons that the Gallup happiness index is being used by UN agencies and others, even more so than some of the objective indicators like GDP per capita or whatever, to sort of gauge where societies are at, is because that happiness index asks all kinds of soft questions. Did you feel respected all day yesterday? Do you feel the government cares about your concerns, even if they're unable to deal with them like the care? Do you feel welcome and safe in your community? Do you have hope for your children's future? All of these kinds of very subjective questions. They've seen time and again, that plummeting happiness index periods, presage, huge disruptions or political upheavals or violence, or whatever, much more so than the objective indicators like falling GDP per capita or whatever it might be.

Shamil Idriss: And then we see time and again, that societies that actually objectively speaking relatively well off, have this sense of great precarity and great insecurity. Whereas other societies sometimes with widespread poverty even, or with much worse economic prospects, maintaining some sense of dignity and some sense of hope for the future, that is so vitally important. It doesn't mean that unemployment and certainly poverty are not important. When you're looking at issues of dignity, obviously there's a direct correlation there. But the correlation between economic wellbeing and peace and stability is not nearly as direct as people think. It's much more of the subjective indicators of people feeling under threat, feeling they don't have security, dignity or hope or any one or all three of those.

Shamil Idriss: And so if we can be tackling those things, I think it is really important. I would say one of the things, I think that most people don't think about building as a pursuit or a field, and those that do, have a pretty outdated and pejorative notion, you know what it means, that it's holding hands and singing songs on the sidelines. The reason that the ministry of justice in Niger asked us to work with the 1400 Boko Haram combatants, that they wanted to find a way to reintegrate into the communities. The reason that we've been getting all this demand from national security advisers and police forces, as well as local communities, whatever it is, because the approach to building has evolved a lot over the last 40 years.

Shamil Idriss: And we know a lot more now about the importance of investing in local solutions, getting people together across the dividing lines locally, and then supporting them to figure out what will build trust. And it works. It works at the individual level, also works at the societal level. It just does take time. You can't fast track it.

Aza Raskin: You outline change institutions, change social norms, change market forces to help sustain peace, and technology now is sitting upstream of even our social norms and culture, like the objective functions we wish for or that we ask for from social media or information, intimidation technologies, changes our social norms. And again, it tilts the playing field, such that hate has a home field advantage or that we want to be sniping at the other side, that makes it incredibly difficult for the on the ground work that you guys are doing to ever be truly successful.

Shamil Idriss: In my last visit to Mali and Niger, I was visiting our teams there. The last meeting I had in Mali before I went to the airport was with 20 youth activists that our team there had been working with. Some of them had started their own organizations. A lot of them were just real leaders in their communities. I just asked them, what are the biggest issues that you're dealing with? We spent almost two hours, most of what they were talking about was the challenges they were facing mainly on WhatsApp, but other platforms where extremist groups were trying to recruit them and their friends, where minorities were being targeted with hate messages or whatever, where rumors were being spread, disinformation.

Shamil Idriss: That's just the stuff, the pernicious effect that these platforms were having. This is the other piece, is that, if the critical threshold experience for people to have, to feel safer, more welcomed, and then to be more constructive themselves in how they engage, if the critical threshold experiences is being heard and respected, whose job is it to do that for us? In the social media, I think the YouTube motto, isn't the YouTube motto, broadcast yourself? It's all broadcast. And so where's the listening. How do we incentivize and really scale up that experience of people feeling heard? Especially when they're made vulnerable, not heard when they post the best vacation photo of the last three years, but heard when they admit a fault or they talk about a challenge that they had, or that they're going through, or problem that they're trying to solve.

Shamil Idriss: Or even frankly, when they say something offensive and people say, I totally disagree with you, but I care about you. I'm not writing you off, but I'm never going to agree with what you just said or did. And so let's try to work through this. That sounds very soft, but it's those kinds of interactions that really heal people and that enable them to open up their shells more and to become more constructive. That requires empathetic listening more so than dueling broadcasting.

Tristan Harris: What could we learn from the skilled facilitators in your group, who can prompt even the most offended person to listen? Because I think we're starting from, in a place now with social media and just in general, I think we have a social media problem that has metastasized into a culture problem, at least in the United States certainly and definitely around the world. Everyone is operating on a such high ego debt of feeling so the victim and harassed, because social media makes that so easy to have experienced for so long, that it's very hard for people to operate with generous assumption. What have you learned about people who are starting from being most offended, that can get them to move into a listening mode?

Shamil Idriss: Not to be trite, but the listening is really critical and who's doing the listening is also really critical. People who feel offended, trying to, again, fast track them to hear the other side while they're sitting in their offense, it's not going to work. They need to be heard. What we have right now is a lot of people across divides, all of whom feel they're the victim, and that's a real challenge to bridge as you're putting it, because they all need to have that experience of being heard and have a safe space. I know facilitators and bridge builders who have said, you know what, I'm going to acknowledge right upfront, this issue is a hugely divisive issue, and if we get into it, we're not going to talk for a while. Let's agree that at some point we'll address that, but to protect ourselves, we're going to set that aside for now.

Shamil Idriss: There's this thing over here where I think we might both have a concern, but let's see if we both do. And if so, maybe we can find some common ground to work on it together. If that works out, then maybe you can come back here, once you built enough of an equity of trust. That's one way. Another way is, people find folks across those dividing lines with whom you can work, to work this problem. You know what, I know one person over there, whatever the camp is, that I trust a relationship with, and she and I, both want to find a way to bring these communities together. We're going to both pull our different communities, and then we're going to find a way to come together. Or, you know what, we're going to find a way to expose people to the hurt that's going on without blaming them.

Shamil Idriss: I know the LGBTQ community and dealing with some of the conservative churches in this country. One of the real breakthroughs that they had, was when they started sharing the stories of gay, LGBTQ, young people, adolescents who had become homeless. They were kicked out of the home, or they committed suicide, the damage that it was having on them, that human damage, by the stance and the way that stance of the church was being conveyed in the household, that opened up whole new things that weren't open before then. In South Africa, there was across the divided communities, during the anti-apartheid struggle, there was an effort to bring communities together.

Shamil Idriss: The thinking was, you know what, we're not going to get people sitting together, but what we could do, is we could shoot video of the testimonials and the stories of people, the human stories of how this conflict is hurting. And we would show those across different communities to open up a conversation. If they just put them in the same room together, right off the bat, it's not going to go well. There are a lot of different techniques and tools and the best way to come up with it is, if you've got a link across those divides that you can co strategize around, or you've got a practice facilitator who can brainstorm some of these ideas together with you.

Tristan Harris: How do you demonstrate that you're there, to try to be as constructive as you possibly can? I think a lot of people feel like, hey, look, I identify with wanting to be constructive and wanting to help. But then if you look at my grievance balance sheets and how much I've been oppressed and how much I'm the victim, I'm not going to start that way. What would that look like, to apply a couple of those lessons you were just sharing?

Shamil Idriss: I think the storytelling and the narrative piece is really huge. Our team in Sri Lanka, after the war there, a 26 year civil war, they launched this community memorialization project. They did it in 400 locations, eventually reached two million people. These were testimonials really powerfully told, captured on video, with art, with other things of Sinhalese and Tamils, talking about the effect the war had on them. People that they lost, what it did to their families, speaking to that pain, and then crafting that in a way where people could access it in a very human way, that didn't point the finger at them or blame anyone. It just told the story of how much people suffered.

Shamil Idriss: I think, again, just as the earlier thing we were talking about, you would never force people in a weak power position that you've got to put aside the thing you're concerned about. It's up to people, what they want to accept to do or not, but you might have to start with that kind of storytelling, or you might have to start with, as you put it, young people leading the way. What we've got going on in this country with a lot of people feeling victimized, and a lot of people really having been victimized over quite some time now and decades in this country, I think we need to find ways of telling the story of hurt and pain in ways that people can hear it without necessarily feeling the fingers being pointed at them to open up conversations that then can be facilitated well. And we can start sitting on the same side of the table and tackling the issues together. Because at the end of the day, everyone is really losing out. I'm not going to say everyone loses out equally. That would be obscene.

Shamil Idriss: This is why I think James Baldwin talked about it. Gandhi, talked about this with the British. They talked a lot about the fact that the unjust structures that are prevailing here, everyone's trapped in them. Now everyone is suffering equally from them, but everyone is being limited by them actually. There is a better place on the other side of this, that is actually better for everyone. I don't think they were saying that because they didn't understand power, certainly not Baldwin and certainly not Gandhi. And unfortunately leaders will sometimes stoke this notion that these issues of security, dignity, and hope, are zero sum. That if they get it, we're going to lose it or that this is about taking it away from you. We have to break through that.

Shamil Idriss: But I think that how you deal with the power dynamics thing you're raising, I think one way to do it is through storytelling and through giving voice to the real human hurt and trauma, and using that, not as a way to get sucked into self-pity, but to open up hearts, to try and come up with a better way for everybody.

Aza Raskin: You sort of now have the ear of the people making technology from designers to CEOs. And in some sense, these companies are a hostage to their business model. It's not really the fault of any manager or even CEO, their competitive race to the bottom of the brainstem. I'm just curious what kinds of final messages you might have, just really just speaking right to them.

Shamil Idriss: One of the best books I've read recently is Rebecca Henderson's, Reimagining Capitalism in a World on Fire. Rebecca is a Harvard business school professor. She's a capitalist. She's in the home of Uber capitalism. She talks about the fact that a recent survey showed that something like 50% of the Harvard MBA students think that capitalism as it's practice today is broken. Okay. Again, we're not talking about people on the streets, living in communes and attacking the whole notion of capitalism. We're talking about people who are pursuing MBAs at Harvard. I talked to Rebecca, she's on our President's Leadership Council now. I talked to her about this. I was fascinated by the book. I asked her, are you getting any resonance among industry leaders? Because this book is so powerful and it's so clear, and it's not saying anyone's a villain or whatever, but it's pointing out the villainous nature of how the system we've set up is dragging us all down.

Shamil Idriss: She talked about some really inspiring cases, but she talked about the huge feeling that so many of them feel, that they're trapped. That if they really do step out that leadership, they'll be replaced for another CEO by the board. She said, "You'd surprised at the number of the ones who have taken big courageous steps. How many of them have done it because their kids started challenging them?" She said, "It's actually astonishing." I think that a huge investment in raising the awareness for young people and then providing channels for them to channel what will be a very natural and forceful desire for change, would be maybe the best thing that we could do.

Shamil Idriss: Gandhi was 24 when he established the Natal Indian Congress in South Africa, before he returned to India to lead the liberation campaign. Mandela was just 25 years old when he co-founded the youth wing of the African National Congress. Martin Luther King was only 26 when he launched the bus boycott. And you know even now, today we're seeing much younger and more girls. Malala is the youngest, Nobel peace Laureate ever. Greta Thunberg was 15, when she started her protest in front of the parliament, all by herself in Sweden, they were both 15 years old when they launched their movements.

Shamil Idriss: So not in a Pollyanna-ish way, quite the contrary, in a really practical way, I want to talk to the kids of those CEOs as much as I'd want to talk to the CEO's. Dark times like this kickoff the best ideas and some of the best new thinking. Society, I don't think evolves in a steady pattern. I think it goes through these discontinuous shifts of incremental and sudden leaps. And those sudden leaps are triggered by something. Oftentimes they're triggered by some kind of trauma or a low point that people feel has been hit. I think we're at a low point. I know a lot of us are concerned that we haven't hit the bottom yet. And so we're concerned about what that could look like, but each rung down that we go will spark new efforts and new initiatives.

Shamil Idriss: I will say this, to the CEO level is, there is a community now, a very well practiced generations of experience, frontline peace builders who know how to heal human relationships individually, and even increasingly societally, at the level that we're talking about, but don't necessarily know how to apply this in the tech world that is increasingly dominating our relationships and our communications means. And so for those that are interested in taking this step forward, whether on their own will or because their kids are pushing them to, or they've got enlightened boards or whatever it is, there's a community that's really willing and eager to engage with you, that can help us take these steps together in an evidence based way, in a practical way. But like I said, I think it's their kids that want to talk to more than anyone.

Tristan Harris: I agree completely. I'm just very grateful for the work that you're doing and all the lessons that I think we need to apply that you're talking about, because there's so many different aspects to it, that I think urgently need to become part of the common lingua franca and common understanding, in the same way that a programmer knows C++, or Python or R, they should know depolarization, they should know the fishbowl technique of braver angels. They should know all of these human nature, sophisticated practices that generally produce better, more compassionate, empathetic outcomes for everyone.

Tristan Harris: We at the Center for Humane Technology, don't pretend that we have answers to all these questions. It's insights from people like Shamil and others that we're hosting on this podcast, that do have some of those answers. The reason we're doing this podcast is so hopefully that you and everyone you know and people you know, are starting to think about what it would mean to apply these insights. As a user of technology, imagine if Instagram influencers got their community together and actually started a hashtag to try to implement some of these peace building initiatives. What if there was a hashtag on TikTok, that showed you lots of kids asking their elders about what's happening in the country and how does it compare to other forms of polarization that they saw growing up? There's a way that children have this innocence, that they can ask these kinds of questions.

Tristan Harris: If you are a technologist, what new metrics could you use to measure more peacebuilding activity? Could you measure like Shamil does in his facilitation groups, what percentage of people who engaged became peacebuilders afterwards? Whether it's the language of shared identity or the metrics for how many times people are coming together to have difficult conversations, or how often children are interacting with their elders and using their place of innocence to bring about a new conversation that doesn't gerrymander us into the emotions that we already feel, of anger and distrust. How could we apply those lessons to technology?

Tristan Harris: We really care about these podcasts leading to real change. We're trying something special, coming next. We'll be hosting conversations with podcast guests or their close allies. After most episodes, there'll be a chance to connect directly with the people you've heard here, the CHT team and others around the world, working to advance humane technology. The next conversation will be with one of the guests from a recent episode, John Wood Jr. From Braver Angels, on Friday, April 2nd, at 1:00 PM. Eastern, 10:00 AM Pacific. We'll be having a conversation with today's guest Shamil Idriss on Friday, April 9th at 1:00 PM. Eastern 10:00 AM Pacific. You can find out more at humanetech.com/get-involved. That's humanetech.com/get-involved.

Tristan Harris: Your Undivided Attention

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