

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

Episode 42: Facebook Whistleblower Frances Haugen in Conversation

- Tristan Harris: Hey everyone. It's Tristan. Real quick before we dive in, the audio quality in this episode wasn't quite as good as we'd want it to be. But we wanted to prioritize getting it to you sooner rather than late because, it's the Facebook whistleblower. Indeed, we got the opportunity to speak with Frances Haugen herself. And if all that sounds exciting to you, and you're an audio producer, we're actually looking for a Senior Producer for this show, Your Undivided Attention. We're especially interested in candidates who are aligned with our mission, which is why we're sharing this opportunity with you, our listeners. So please apply. or share the role with someone who might. Visit humanetech.com/careers. And with that, here we go.
- Frances Haugen: I joined Facebook because I had a very close friend who helped me relearn to walk when I got really sick back in 2015, 2016, who got radicalized on the internet. So the issue of misinformation and the quality of our information environment was a very personal issue for me. And once I began working at Facebook, it became apparent to me over time that there were conflicts of interest between what was in the public's good and the profits of Facebook, and that Facebook consistently resolved those conflicts by prioritizing profits over people. And at some point, I realized the only real path forward, the only thing that was aligned with the public good, was making sure that the public had the information they needed to make decisions that were good for themselves.
- Tristan Harris: That's Frances Haugen. She's a specialist in algorithmic product management. She worked on ranking algorithms at Google, Pinterest, and Yelp, and was even a co-founder of a popular dating app called Hinge. She was then recruited to Facebook to be a product manager on civic misinformation, and then worked on counter-espionage. But what she saw at Facebook was that the company was consistently and knowingly prioritizing profits over public safety. So Frances made the courageous decision to blow the whistle, which resulted in the biggest disclosure in the history of Facebook, and in the history of social media. We are genuinely now in social media's Big Tobacco moment. I'm Tristan Harris.
- Aza Raskin: And I'm Aza Raskin.
- Tristan Harris: And this is Your Undivided Attention, the podcast from the Center for Humane Technology. What's wild about Frances Haugen's whistleblowing is that our very conversations about it are falling prey to precisely the forces that she's whistleblowing about. For example, do you have an opinion about Frances? Did you read that opinion on social media, on Facebook, or on Twitter? There are stories going viral right now that she's some kind of operative, or a fake, or phony whistleblower, or she was secretly colluding with the government to drive up more censorship of speech online. But these stories are actually going viral because of the very forces that Frances is talking about.

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- Tristan Harris: But the amazing thing about Frances is, she still believes change is possible, and that's why she blew the whistle. In order to help Facebook make the changes that so many people outside the company and so many people on the inside want Facebook to make.
- Aza Raskin: Frances, I am so excited to have you here on Your Undivided Attention. And I just have to start by asking how are you? And when you decided to blow the whistle, did you realize that what you were planning to leak would become the biggest expose in the history of the company?
- Frances Haugen: I'm doing okay. The months between when I left Facebook and when the stories began to come out were much harder than the last week, because I accept the consequences of my actions. I don't think I did anything wrong. I took a great personal risk because I cared about what I thought the consequences were, right? That I thought kids' lives were at risk, that Facebook was responsible for ethnic violence in other countries.
- Frances Haugen: But the thing that motivated me to act was a fear for the ethnic violence in Myanmar and in Ethiopia was just the beginning. And it's really scary, right? You look down the road. And at my low point, which was New Year's Eve, 2019, 2020, I literally had a panic attack on New Year's Eve because it had been so many months of learning more, and more, and more depressing, scary things, and feeling like there wasn't resources inside the company to actually make the level of difference fast enough to respect those lives. Right? And Facebook keeps saying this. They're like, "We invest more in integrity than anyone else in the world." Well it's like yeah, but you also have voluntarily chosen to go into some of the most fragile places in the world. And to take on even more responsibility, you've chosen to subsidize the internet for the people in those vulnerable places, but only if they use Facebook.
- Frances Haugen: So I think there is a certain level of obligation that comes from the idea of if you save someone's life, you're responsible for it, right? If Facebook is going to take on the internet experience for hundreds of millions of people around the world who, because Facebook subsidized their internet, a free and open internet didn't develop in their language. It feels like they have a higher obligation of safety for those people, given that they have made it harder for alternatives to emerge.
- Tristan Harris: Maybe that's a good place to dive in because you worked on the civic integrity team, which was looking at a lot of what I think you called at-risk countries, or maybe Facebook has that internal terminology. And I think we've spoken a little bit on this podcast about that. But my sense is that you were looking at a lot of really dark things that were happening around the world. And they were a lot darker than maybe what's happening in the U.S. But I have a sense that we get a flavor of that, as we've talked about a lot in this podcast. Do you want to talk a little bit about what are the things that you saw that you were worried that not enough other people

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were seeing? I'll just say one last thing, which is you realized that, the world didn't understand the information you were looking at because you were part of what, a team of 20 or something people inside Civic Integrity who actually knew this. And it had big consequences, and the rest of the world didn't know that. And I just relate to that so much, that there's this sort of internal truth of certain areas of the tech industry that are bound by these problems. And the rest of the world doesn't understand it. And I would just love – How do we go ahead and equalize some of that asymmetry where people don't understand what was happening that you saw?

Frances Haugen:

I think the question of even inside the United States, outside the United States, I joined Facebook because I saw how bad, I had lived with the consequences of what misinformation could do in the United States. And I showed up, and I learned almost immediately that, what we see in the United States is the sanitized, healthiest version of Facebook. That most languages in the world don't have basic integrity systems from Facebook, because Facebook has only chosen a handful of languages to write these AI systems that make their system safer. And I learned that in places in the world where people are freshly coming on the internet, there's lots of norms that we take for granted as people who live in a society that's had the internet for 30 years at this point. For example, the idea that people put fake stuff up on the internet. That idea is not actually a norm in other places to the same extent that it is here. You had people with master's degrees in India saying, these are educated people saying, Why would someone go to the trouble of putting something fake on the internet? That sounds like a lot of work.

Frances Haugen:

And once you start realizing that people's experience of the internet is so different depending on where you are, right? That someone who is becoming literate to use Facebook for the first time in a place like Myanmar. The experience of the internet in a situation like that is just very, very different than what we're seeing today. And we're about to face a real, real big change as a global civilization in terms of, as Starlink — so that's SpaceX's internet service provider — as Starlink expands, I bet Facebook gets another billion users over the next five years. And those people, a lot of them will have had the internet for the first time. They may become literate to use Facebook. And given the level of protections I saw Facebook was giving to people in the most vulnerable places in the world, I genuinely think that there are a kind of shockingly large number of lives on the line.

Tristan Harris:

From a business perspective, it also costs resources to support each one of these other languages. And there's a growth rate to here's these new countries that are coming online. Here's these new languages that are coming online. And they're all languages we haven't seen before, which means that they cost a lot more than a million more users in a language

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we already have. So do you want to talk a little about the economies of scale that kind of emerged from this issue?

Frances Haugen: The economies of scale issue is really essential to the safety problem at Facebook. Let's imagine Facebook is trying to roll out to new countries and new languages. They would do exactly what Facebook has done. They started out in English, they got lots and lots of English-speaking users. They started rolling out to major Western European languages. They moved out into the next largest markets. And as they continue to grow, they keep going into these communities that have fewer and fewer language speakers.

Frances Haugen: Programming a new language for safety, building out these integrity and safety systems, costs the same amount in a language that has 10 million speakers as one like English, that has a billion speakers. As you roll into these new languages, the average amount of revenue you get gets smaller and smaller, because each one of these new languages has fewer speakers. And on average, the speakers of those languages are less affluent than the ones that are already on the platform. So, given that there is a fixed cost for each one of these new languages, it's just not economical for Facebook to build out the level of safety that currently is available in the United States in these other places. And people are paying for that with their lives.

Aza Raskin: What this brings to mind is Sophie Zhang, who is another Facebook whistleblower. And to quote her, she said, "I have found multiple blatant attempts by foreign national governments to abuse our platform on vast scales to mislead their own citizenry and cause international news on multiple occasions. I have personally made decisions that affected national presidents without oversight and taken action to enforce against so many prominent politicians globally, that I've lost count." And I believe you've talked Frances about the triage process. I can't remember whether you said it was 80% or two thirds of the cases when you were on the espionage teams that you just had to ignore.

Frances Haugen: So I worked on counterespionage under the threat intelligence org as the last job I did at Facebook. And our team was small enough that of the cases we knew about, we only were able to actively work on about a third of them. About a third of them, we would occasionally check in on them. And a third of them, they were basically in the ice box. And maybe occasionally someone would take a look, but they weren't able to be worked at the level that that third of cases that got support got.

Frances Haugen: And the part that I think is most concerning is we intentionally did not invest in proactive detection mechanisms because we couldn't support the cases that we had to start with. So the metaphor that I think of for this is, we were dealing with the outer skin of an onion, only we didn't know if the size of the onion was a baseball or a beach ball. Because we

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intentionally did not invest in systems to figure out how many candidate cases there were, because we couldn't work on the ones that we already had.

Frances Haugen: So there's this question of why is that happening? Facebook makes \$40 billion in profit a year, right? That's not the revenues, that's profit. Surely Facebook could afford to have 50 people on that team instead of having under 10, maybe six people on that team.

Frances Haugen: I think there is a real thing of that Facebook has a long tradition of thinking of itself as a scrappy startup. And there is a lack of appropriate baselining for what level of investment should be happening. So Facebook has made a number of statements about how there's hard trade offs involved. And if the answers were easy, these problems would be solved. And it's like, actually, there's lots of solutions that have been identified by Facebook's own employees. The challenge here is that Facebook doesn't want to invest 3, 4, 5 times as many people in solving these problems. And because there is no oversight, we the public never get a chance to weigh in on what level of investment should be happening, even though our safety and our lives is on the line.

Tristan Harris: It seems like that's kind of the main issue that so often came up in the themes of the documents that you disclosed is, Facebook so far as I could tell in the documents, their own researchers would say, "We have actually many solutions to this problem." But then when given the choice to implement them, not always, but when given the choice to implement them, they would choose to simply not make that change if it would drop revenue, growth, or engagement.

Tristan Harris: Why do you think that is? I mean, in so many cases, whether it's teenage mental health, or in investing more in integrity, or in reducing virality as opposed to dealing with content moderation or fact checking, why do you think it is that they wouldn't opt for what was good for society when they have the resources to do so?

Frances Haugen: I have a lot of empathy for where Facebook is coming from. So a real challenge and a responsibility they take on, which I think is great is a seriousness about making decisions around being sensitive to the fact that they do have a lot of power. One of the things that I think is unfortunate is, they are uncomfortable enough about the notion that they have that power, that they avoid making decisions. So for example, Twitter has made the call of, you have to click through a link in order to reshare it, right? That's not a giant imposition. The idea that if you want to share a link, you need to at least click on the link. And the reality is, little changes like that increase the friction of how information spreads actually have a really big impact on the quality of the information that spreads.

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- Frances Haugen: At the same time, part of why I think Facebook didn't implement that is, one, it would slightly decrease growth, right? We're talking 0.1% sessions kind of thing. Not a huge impact to growth, but still an impact to growth. And second, they'd have to acknowledge that their systems were dangerous, right? And Facebook tries to stay away from any kind of opportunity where people might associate that the company is dangerous. So I think those are factors that lead them to not act.
- Frances Haugen: It becomes this question of who gets to decide how trade-offs should be resolved? And right now, the public doesn't get any transparency into that. So it's just up to Facebook to decide whether or not they want to prioritize growth at all costs.
- Aza Raskin: That explains why Facebook likes to frame things in such false dichotomies. It's either free speech or censorship, nothing in between. And I'm really curious, just what other of your favorite examples of solutions that the brilliant people inside of Facebook came up with that they know would do something, and then they've chosen not to do?
- Frances Haugen: Here's an example. Lots of dynamics on Facebook are driven by extreme users. And by extreme, I don't mean their positions are extreme. I mean the intensity of their usage of the platform is extreme.
- Frances Haugen: So for example, someone who is a 99th percentile user in terms of the number of pieces of content they produce — maybe that's posts, or maybe it's comments, might produce 10 times as many pieces of content as a 95th percentile user. And a 99.99 percent user might produce 100 times as much content as a 99th percentile user, or at least a 95th percentile user.
- Frances Haugen: So you can imagine a system or a change where you just came in and said, Okay, we're going to figure out what the 99th percentile is for a number of comments. Let's cap the number of comments you can give in a day at that number of comments. So that might be 30 comments a day. I don't know. I don't know the exact number. But when they went and did that analysis in the case of COVID, even if you ignore the content of the comments, you just say, "We're going to cap people at whatever the 99th percentile is right now, that ends up having a huge impact on COVID misinformation. Because a very, very small number of people are hyper sharers, or they're hyper commenters. And there's a lot of power in just saying, Hey, let's make space for more people to talk. Because it turns out on average, people are pretty cool.
- Tristan Harris: Yeah. Renee DiResta, one of our previous guests talks about this as the "asymmetry of passion." But what you're talking about is the hyper-asymmetry of passion, where you have a small number of people who are posting all over the place. I think in some of your other work, you talked about the invites, and that there's certain people also who invite many,

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many, many more people to groups. And that that's also kind of a different issue. Do you want to talk about some of those other asymmetries? I think if it as, in complexity theory, the notion of scale. That there's certain things that are at greater, greater scales than others, and we could pay attention to the outliers. And how do we control some of the extreme usage that's more dangerous.

Frances Haugen: The example that you gave there around invites. So I've discussed before the idea that Facebook should have to publish what all of its rate limits are. So a rate limit is, let's say we sat down and said, How many people should someone be allowed to invite to groups? In any given day or any given week? How many people should they be allowed to invite overall in that same time period? Because the reality is that some people are trying to weaponize the platform, and most people aren't.

Frances Haugen: You can imagine coming in and saying, Okay, you can invite 1,000 people a week to groups. The current limits are set so high, that the documents show that there was a person they found who had invited 300,000 people to QAnon related groups. And one of the things that's kind of scary about that is that Facebook has a feature in place such that if you are invited to a group, Facebook will inject content from that group into your feed for, I think it's 30 days. And if you engage with any of it, they'll consider that a ghost follow. So when that person went and invited 300,000 people to QAnon groups, now all those people started having their feeds flooded with QAnon content.

Tristan Harris: Wait, so this is important. You're saying that if someone gets invited to a group, they don't even accept the invite. They're not saying, "Yes, I would like to join your QAnon group." You're saying, suddenly by just the invitation alone, their feed gets flooded with QAnon posts. And then if they engage at all, it kind of auto-joins them in some way?

Frances Haugen: Yes, it's this question of that Facebook knows that groups are a valuable conduit for people to connect on Facebook. And that sometimes, people get invited to groups and they either don't notice the invitation, or maybe they don't really understand that they have to accept it. So Facebook's idea is that, instead of waiting for someone to accept a group, that you might inject content from that group into their feed for a period of time. And if they engage with that, then we should assume that they want to continue to receive that content.

Frances Haugen: This becomes problematic when people get invited to really large groups. Because let's say you have a group that has half a million members, and it produces 500 pieces of content a day. If you have an algorithm, Engagement Based Ranking, that prioritizes divisive, polarizing, hateful content, that content ends up ... and there's 500 posts a day from that group. You might have a situation where Facebook has to figure out what two or three posts of that 500 should go into your newsfeed. And if you

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know that those biases exist with your engagement based ranking, it means you're going to keep having this kind of forcing function that gives mass distribution to extreme content.

Frances Haugen: So, when you combine that with the fact that Facebook will start auto injecting content if you get invited, it's kind of a perfect storm. Because it means that someone who's really motivated, they have that asymmetrical passion, can add huge numbers of people to their group every day, and then be able to force a stream of extreme content into their feed.

Tristan Harris: And if I recall correctly, wasn't the reason that Facebook leaned more on Facebook groups because regular user engagement was going down, that regular users are posting less?

Frances Haugen: Facebook noticed that people who were members of groups had a higher retention rate on the platform. And part of that is because they get exposed to more content. Groups are generally wonderful. People love coming together. And to be clear, I'm not saying that groups are bad. I'm just saying that, the way you would design groups without algorithmic feeds, without having computers choose what to focus on, is you would design those groups in a much more human scale. You'd have things that looked like Discord servers, right? Things where people have a single conversation. And if it gets too noisy, they start opening smaller rooms that focus on other topics. So I think there's a real advantage to having more of a human-oriented design strategy instead of having an "AI will save us strategy."

Frances Haugen: Most people are not aware of how Facebook builds the systems that get to pick out the content that go into your newsfeed. Facebook goes and takes the actions of millions and millions and millions of people. And they say, Okay, so we have this information about what people were interested in the past. We have information about the content that we could show them. We're going to try to make these predictions and see how accurate were we. And systems are "trained" by looking at those millions and millions of people's actions.

Frances Haugen: But the reality is that not all of those people on the system interact with Facebook the same amount. So if the behavior of someone who looks at thousands of posts every day is different than the behavior of someone who looks at, say, 50 a day, that person, the person who looks at 1,000 a day has 20 times the impact on the algorithm as someone who looks at 50 stories a day.

Frances Haugen: So what's interesting is Facebook knows that some of the people who consume the most misinformation, they've gone through life experiences recently that make them more vulnerable. Maybe they were recently widowed. Maybe they were recently divorced. Maybe they moved to a new city. Maybe they're getting depressed. But those people end up

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influencing the algorithm to an outsized impact compared to the average user. So there's a lot of these weird feedback cycles where, as people get more depressed, they might more compulsively use the platform. The idea that their actions could then feed back and influence an average user of the platform is kind of crazy. And you can imagine doing things like coming in and capping how much impact any given user could contribute to the overall ranking for everyone else. And that might also help rein in some of these impacts.

Tristan Harris:

I'm thinking of it almost like a Gini coefficient, a measure of inequality. That we cap the amount of inequality we want in society. Well, there's an inequality in how much the more depressed, anxious, angry, etc. people are actually influencing my feed. I think actually from a personal sovereignty perspective, the notion that people who are sorting for that reactivity are actually disproportionately influencing what I see as a normal user, that kind of speaks to the ways in which we don't really have this kind of marketplace of free speech. Even my own usage is asymmetrically influenced by the people who have shown themselves to be more reactive or have other psychological issues going on. Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

Frances Haugen:

Yeah. So I've done studies on who are the people exposed to the most misinformation. And because people who are socially isolated, so maybe their spouse recently died, or they got divorced, or they moved to a new city. Because those people don't have as many avenues for social connection in face-to-face communications, they often lean heavier on Facebook. A lot of Facebook strategies for dealing with conspiracies, myths, hoaxes, are about demoting that content in their feed. If you consume thousands of pieces of content a day, those demotions stop having an impact, right? Because you're still going to get down to the stuff that might be harmful.

Frances Haugen:

People sometimes ask why am I so adamant about chronological feeds? So that means your newsfeed should be put together using a system that you understand, right? Let's order it by time, like your email. Or maybe order it by time and explain to you any other tweaks that happen. That system is something we all can understand together. We can have a conversation about it. But when you have a system that someone who is coping with their anxiety by consuming 2,000 pieces of Facebook content a day and becoming more anxious as they read more extreme things on Facebook, do we really want to have that kind of behavior bleed over into people who haven't yet been influenced by Facebook that way?

Tristan Harris:

So it's almost like we don't just have a gradient of privilege. We have a gradient of anxiety, where the most anxious people pass on more of their anxiety or things like that to the other users. And also, the lower you scroll, the worse it gets is kind of one of the other things that seems to emerge from what you've just shared.

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- Aza Raskin: One of the things that really struck me about the change to meaningful social interaction is that as Frances has said, it forced political parties to take more extreme views. And on free speech, how can you have free speech when people's true beliefs are being held hostage to Facebook's need for virality?
- Frances Haugen: Yeah. So I think one of the things that I found very shocking about what's in the documents is, there are multiple examples of people external to Facebook cluing in on patterns that were seen inside of Facebook. So researchers inside of Facebook saw things like. the more angry the comment threads on a post, the more clicks go out of Facebook back to a publisher. The publishers were writing in and saying, Hey, our most popular content on Facebook is some of the content we're most ashamed of. It's inflammatory, it's divisive. It plays on stereotypes. Political parties were coming to Facebook and saying, Hey, we noticed you changed the algorithm. It used to be that we could share out something like a white paper on our agricultural policy and people would still get to read it. Only now when we do that, all we get is crickets. It doesn't really work anymore. Because in engagement based ranking, those polarizing, extreme, divisive pieces of content are the ones that win.
- Frances Haugen: I think that's one of these interesting things where people want to say ... I think why I feel so strongly about chronological ranking, you know, order by time, is that everyone can understand what order by time is. And even Facebook doesn't really understand how the newsfeed works. And I just think it's safer for society for us to say, Hey, let's have a thing prioritizing our attention that we all understand instead of a system that not even the experts in the world understand.
- Tristan Harris: Of course, for that to work in a game theoretic way, the app TikTok, versus Twitter, versus Instagram, versus Facebook, the one that chooses chronological feed, won't get as much engagement as the ones that rank by what's really good at getting your attention. So if we were to go chronological, that's the kind of thing that you would need as a kind of a game theoretic multipolar trap. You would need everyone to go to a chronological feed at the same time. And what I think that's pointing to is not necessarily that ... I mean, you said it yourself. You can start with chronological feed, but what you're really talking about is that everyone should understand why the things that are coming to them are coming to them. And it shouldn't be based on a automated system that prioritizes the things that make society not work. The way I think about it now is that Facebook is basically their business model is making sure you can never have a Thanksgiving dinner where you understand anybody else at the table. The business model is polarizing society so that everyone gets their own personalized view of what was most dividing, etc.
- Tristan Harris: And the goal here can't just be a nicer, more enjoyable Facebook. It's got to be, Facebook is operating the information system, or all these systems

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are operating the information that goes into an open society. And the open society's ability to govern is based on synthesis, and constructiveness, and perspective seeking, and perspective synthesis and saying, Okay, what are we actually going to do about our biggest problems? And the biggest problem I see in an engagement based ranking system, is that by rewarding more extreme, polarizing population bases or political bases, it means that as you said, politicians and political leaders have to cater to a more extreme base, which means that their unique selling proposition to their constituents is never agreeing with the other side, which means that democracy grinds to a halt.

Tristan Harris: And that's what I mean by, Facebook's business model is making sure you can't show up at the dinner table on Thanksgiving and have a conversation, and making sure that you're always going to lose faith in your democracy. Those two things are incompatible with democracy's working. And that's the kind of thing that makes people say, Hey, I don't even want this democracy anymore. I want authoritarianism. So either I want China, or I want to elect some kind of strong man, who's just going to smash the glass and break through this thing so we can actually have a real governance that is delivering results at least in some direction, as opposed to constant gridlock.

Aza Raskin: It also means that we're talking about not just Facebook, but a business model more generally. And as you're pointing out Tristan, that means it can't be something that, the solution can't be applied only to Facebook. It has to be applied to the entire industry at once.

Frances Haugen: Yeah. I think it's a thing where we're going to have to have government oversight and have them step in and say, Hey, section 230 right now gives immunity for content that is supplied by users, right? So it's like if platforms aren't the ones creating content, then they're not responsible for the content that gets created.

Frances Haugen: But platforms are responsible for the choices they make in designing their algorithms. And I think exempting those algorithm and choices from 230 and forcing platforms to have to publish enough data that people could hold them accountable. It's an interesting strategy for forcing more platforms to go towards chronological ranking. Because the reality is, if people can choose between an addiction-based, growth-hacked, algorithmic engagement ranking based feed, or one that is time-based, they're always going to pick the one that's engagement based. Because it is stickier. It does make you consume more content.

Frances Haugen: But at the same time, it also makes people depressed. It also causes eating disorders in kids. There's real consequences to these systems. And I just think in the end, if you actually talked to people and you said, "Do you want computers to choose what you focus on? Or do you want to choose what you focus on?" I think from a personal sovereignty perspective, we

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should all want to have control over what we focus on, not have computers tell us. Especially Facebook's computers.

Tristan Harris: I mean, the complexity here is that a lot of people pick who they follow or who they add as a friend based on the AI recommended suggestions about who you should follow and who you should recommend. So the computer again is involved in saying, Here's some users that are more extreme voices that we know that if you add them as a friend or you follow them on Twitter, they're the ones that are going to get you coming back all the time, because they say the most outrageous things. So even if we're picking who our 'friends' are, if the menu is not the menu that we picked on our own, but was picked by again, an engagement based AI, the thing just kind of keeps going upstream.

Frances Haugen: If we could have it be 80% less bad, 90% less bad. I totally get it. I'm actually really concerned about the engagement based recommendations of what groups you should join or what people you should follow. Totally get it. Totally agree. But at least start with the newsfeed. At least get that under control. We shouldn't be afraid of making a problem 90 or 95% better because we can't make it 100% better.

Tristan Harris: One of the things Frances that really struck me about your testimony, about your 60 Minutes piece, just the way that you show up is that you seem to be very motivated by care, right? You say things like, "I want to heal Facebook. This doesn't feel like anger per se." Although I feel notes of anger. But it feels nuanced, and it feels almost more like an intervention. I'm really curious, how did you come to be this way? How do you hold care in such high stakes?

Frances Haugen: There's a lot of research on, how do people actually change? And people very, very rarely change because you're angry at them, right? It's just not how humans respond to stimulus. And I just don't think being angry at people accomplishes a lot. We've had combativeness. We've seen polarization in society. A lot more happens by reaching across the aisle with people or saying this is a collaborative problem that we can work on together. And I think I just have a lot longer time horizon than a lot of people do, right? That I would rather do the walk with someone approach than the fight someone approach. And Facebook likes to say, "She didn't even make it two years." One, I would have worked at Facebook longer than two years, except for they did not let me move to where I wanted to move. But two, Facebook needs to have a lot more voices involved in the problem-solution process. And there were a lot of people who didn't get a chance to do that kind of collaborative care-based intervention. And I think there's an opportunity here where, we've been angry at Facebook for so long.

Frances Haugen: What if we came in and said, "Facebook, you're stuck." We keep having these same arguments. What if we had different arguments? What if we

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brought more people to the table? And one of the things that's been amazing about giving testimony in the last few days is that once you give people in Congress a lot more options on what are steps forward, we can have a lot more of a diverse conversation than just, Is there a good or bad content on the platform? Should we take more or less of it down? And I would much rather have a constructive conversation than have a demonizing conversation.

Frances Haugen: The process of change is a very long and slow one. And when you're driven by anger, you generally burn out. And people have commented to me about the scale of this disclosure. I don't think I could have pulled this off if I was motivated by anger, because it took too much effort to pull it off as it is.

Frances Haugen: One of the things I find interesting is we are used to using the phrase "morally bankrupt." And people keep misinterpreting my statement of moral bankruptcy as meaning that I am saying Facebook is morally bankrupt. The reality is, I'm trying to take the word "bankruptcy," in a financial sense. In our society, sometimes people get in over their heads, right? People spend too much money. They take on too much debt. They can't pay it off. And in our society, we believe that people's lives are more valuable than money. We have an avenue where if someone gets in too over their head, we have an avenue where they can admit that they are overwhelmed, and that they need help. And it doesn't mean they get off scot-free. But if they're willing to be honest and they are willing to ask for help, we have a mechanism where they can take a reset.

Frances Haugen: And I really think that Facebook needs our help. Being angry at Facebook is not going to solve the problem. Having Facebook hunker down and being more embattled is not going to solve the problem. What Facebook needs, is it needs people to work with them and for us to all together find solutions.

Frances Haugen: And I think the only way they're going to be able to recruit the people they need to solve these problems, or to get the will to solve these problems internally is if they declare moral bankruptcy. They need to come in and say, Yeah, we've done some things. Some real serious things. Some of the things we did intentionally, and some of the things we did unintentionally. We made other decisions we thought were good that led us down this path. And as a result, we need to have a path out. Because all of us live on this planet together. All of us are going to have social media. The idea that getting rid of social media is plausible, I don't think that's true. But I think there's an opportunity there.

Frances Haugen: And I think there's an opportunity for Mark Zuckerberg to live a life where he feels at peace, where Facebook can put the employee ... I never received a piece of clothing, a bag, a gift when I was at Facebook that had the company logo on it. And the reason for that is that Facebook

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employees are endangered when they wear their company logo. And I have this dream that one day, Facebook will work together with the public and we will actually begin to heal some of these problems, and that Facebook employees will get issued jackets, and backpacks, and hats that have a logo on it again. And I think that's possible. And that's my hope. And that's what I think moral bankruptcy could bring.

Aza Raskin: Frances, are there any political, or spiritual, or other leaders from the past that you look up to as you think about this work?

Frances Haugen: I think part of why people get so angry about Facebook is, they feel like it's impossible to change Facebook. You see a lot of the comments that people have made as people have seen my disclosures and they sound just exasperated. They're like, Is any of this new? Nothing ever changes. And I hear a real sense of powerlessness. And I really am inspired by people like Gandhi or Nelson Mandela. I do believe in the power of peaceful resistance, right? I do believe in the power of passivism. But the thing that I find inspiring about both those cases is that those people took on seemingly impossible foes. And because they were willing to work slowly and diligently — it took them decades. Decades and decades of work. And I think sometimes in tech, we rarely look more than two years down the road. We say if we can't accomplish something in two years, it's not worth doing.

Frances Haugen: And I think there's this question of, if we believe that things like engagement-based ranking are so dangerous, that there might be hundreds of thousands or millions of lives on the line, it becomes a thing where, choosing strategies that allow us to keep grinding, potentially for a long time, right? If you're powered by anger, you'll burn up into a little crisp. But if you come in and you say, I see that Mark Zuckerberg is suffering. I see that Facebook employees are suffering. People who work on keeping us safe on Facebook grind themselves into the ground. We need a different way forward. We need to help them feel like they can be a collaborative, integrated member of society, not one that that feels misunderstood and persecuted. That sounds like a horrible fate. And you can grind away on social change for quite a long time if you're powered by the power of hope. And I think there's a real opportunity here where there's a collaborative solutions approach that involves governments around the world, involves people all around the world, where we can make social media that we enjoy, that helps us bring out the best in humanity. And I think that's possible.

Frances Haugen: And one of the things I'm most scared of from my disclosures is discouraging people from working at Facebook. Because I think working at Facebook is one of the most important jobs in the world. I will lightly nag them until I get to work there again. That is my hopeful dream one day. And people say I'm a Pollyanna for that, but you never know. You never know. I have great optimism. And it's one of these things where, that

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cycle, I don't see how it breaks unless Facebook declares moral bankruptcy. Facebook needs more people working there to solve these problems. In order to get more people to work there, people have to have faith that Facebook is acting in good faith. That Facebook really wants to solve these problems. That it's willing to make the hard choices that will let them solve these problems. So coming out and declaring moral bankruptcy is the process of saying, I need help. I'm in over my head. But I'm willing to change. And I'm making a commitment to change. Will you join me? And I think that that is a path forward. That is a path to healing, and a path to making social media that we enjoy, that it brings out the best in humanity.

- Tristan Harris: I'm curious Frances as you think about governance for Facebook to take this action or all the other actions that are sort of like this, the safer for society at the cost of a little bit of profit. What is the institutional governance, the process by which we can get there? Because there's going to be this example, and then there's going to be another 10 examples, and then another 100 going down. Designing products is a moving process. What is the moving process for governance that sort of matches the knowledge required and the speed required to work on products like this?
- Frances Haugen: We need to have a conversation about, how do we make sure that Facebook isn't the only one grading its homework. Facebook has established a pattern where even when asked very important, direct questions, questions like, "Is Facebook safe for our kids?" Facebook has outright lied to official groups like Congress.
- Frances Haugen: We need to have a process of having privacy protected data. There's ways of obscuring the data such that people's privacy won't be harmed. And Facebook has been emphasizing a false choice. That we can either have oversight, or we can have privacy. And that is a false choice. We need to be working collaboratively with researchers to develop obfuscation techniques that can be privacy sensitive, but also give meaningful data.
- Frances Haugen: So the very, very bare minimum is we need to have enough data that someone other than Facebook can choose what questions to ask about Facebook. The second is, we need to have something like a regulatory body that can actually force Facebook to make changes when those independent researchers identify problems. Because right now, until the incentives change, nothing is going to change at Facebook. And Facebook has shown that on its own, it will not change.
- Aza Raskin: Right. Right now for everyone that's on the outside, but on team help make Facebook better. It's like we're a surgeon trying to operate on a patient, but we can't see inside the patient.

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- Frances Haugen: Yup. Totally. Feels like cigarette companies, right? The cigarette companies when they were getting pressed about cancer ... and just to be clear with people, tobacco causes cancer in approximately 10% of people who smoke for decades. In the case of Instagram, the person Facebook provided for Senate testimony, she said 80% of kids are fine on Instagram. So 20% of kids aren't fine on Instagram? We should care about that. Once cigarette companies came out and said, Hey, we are willing to admit that cancer is a bad thing. We've invented these filtered cigarettes to make smoking safer. We're going to dilute the smoke with air. It's safer. It causes less cancer. Because scientists could independently confirm whether or not that marketing message was true, we were able to find out, No, in fact, filtered cigarettes are actually more dangerous because people smoke substantially more when the experience of smoking is more pleasant. So people were breathing deeper in these carcinogens. They were consuming net more nicotine, net more tobacco, over longer periods of time.
- Frances Haugen: So right now, Facebook makes claims about how hard it's working on things. But we have no idea if any of these problems are getting better. And from what little we do see from external researchers trying to piece together data, we can see that misinformation has gotten substantially worse on the platform. That it gets distributed to more people, and that the platform gets ever more concentrated. And that's dangerous. That imperils people's lives.
- Tristan Harris: And that I think is my meta-concern when we talk about solutions, which is that the first derivative of harms increasing, the first and second derivative. So for those that don't remember pre-calc, we're just talking about the growth rate of things like misinformation, the growth rate of fake accounts, the growth rate of content that's toxic that we can identify. If the growth rate of all those harms is exceeding the speed in growth rate of our solutions, then we know what the world is going to look like. And it's not good.
- Tristan Harris: And in my mind, when we talk about what kind of governance is necessary, the only kind of governance that was adequate to the situation would not just be to the growth rate of the harms. But I mean, we want this to be going in the other direction. We don't want just to move towards 5% less bad Facebook while the bads are growing at 50% per year. That's not going to get us very far. We want to move to a world where Facebook or social media as it's a brain implant in our democracy, actually makes for a better and stronger democracy. And what I really wonder about is how can the growth rate of our solutions and the things that we're implementing to fix these problems, how can that be faster than the trillion dollar tech companies that are trying to hide the problem? To me, this is the no joke trillion dollar question. It's the growth rate of the harms compared to the growth rate of governance.

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- Frances Haugen: So the fear is Facebook can move so much faster than government can move. And I think the thing that we always have to come back to is if the issue is that we're worried that Facebook can move faster than government can move, then we should absolutely insist for transparency and access to data. I totally agree with you. We have an existential threat on our hands. But we can either throw up our hands and say, Oh no, the singularity is getting away from us, or we can fight. And I really believe that we have not lost the opportunity to change. We have not lost the opportunity to act. And if that is our fear, that we have to move as absolutely as fast as possible, then let's do that. Let's build that organization. Let's build the ability to execute at that speed, because we have to.
- Tristan Harris: When we think about changing something as big as Facebook or as gargantuan as the entire social media engagement industry, where do we begin? We talk about platform tweaks, design changes, and government regulation. But where should we start? What should we focus on? Systems theorists Donella Meadows had a brilliant answer to that question. In 1972, she introduced a framework known as the 12 leverage points to intervene in a system or framework basically identifies 12 different leverage points for making change in a complex system, and puts those leverage points on a scale of increasing leverage. Leverage points lower down on the scale are often easier to push, but have less impact on the system. Leverage points higher up on the scale are often much harder to push, but have more impact. There are also feedback loops, which means pushing on a lower leverage point can sometimes have unpredictably outsized impact.
- Tristan Harris: Bringing it back to Facebook, we need an all of the above strategy. We need to push on the lower leverage points of small platform tweaks, design changes, and internal governance, while advocating for longer term systemic reform through external government regulation and the push for new business models. And in a world where Facebook affects almost 3 billion people every day, even a tiny platform tweak can completely change the world.
- Tristan Harris: It is by strategically pushing on a whole ecology of Donella Meadows' 12 leverage points that we can make systemic change to the complex system that is Facebook, the social media industry, and our society beyond.
- Aza Raskin: Speaking of other solutions that are very small but can have a pretty big impact, one of the things, listening to Wall Street Journal files, and it was I think hidden in the fourth episode. The reporter talks about a senior Facebook data scientist who goes to the executive news feeds and says, "Hey, our data shows that if you just limit the number of re-shares, how many hops it can take—I can share to you, you can share to Tristan but no further—that that does more for fighting misinformation and toxic content than almost anything that we've done so far. Can you expand on

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that please? Can you explain how that works, why it works, and what the solution is?

Frances Haugen: Yeah. So when people talk about the idea that all that I want is censorship, I find that a mischaracterization of what I want. Because I want to have platform changes. I don't want us to pick winners and losers in the marketplace of ideas. And the case of limiting reshare lengths basically says, Hey, we know that the further down a reshare chain you get — let's say it's a reshare, of a reshare, of a reshare, of a reshare — the content gets worse and worse on average. And that's because information that is crafted to be viral is designed to play on all of our vulnerabilities. So the further down on the reshare chain you get, the higher chance that content is bad content.

Frances Haugen: Instead of picking which ideas are good and bad, if we just said, Hey, you can share things infinitely, but you have to copy and paste at some point. If a reshare chain gets more than, say, two hops long, you have to take a moment and copy and paste. No one is stopping you. You really want to keep spreading that idea, copy and paste. But let's just not knee-jerk that. It's kind of like saying you have to click through a link before in order to reshare it. You're not being oppressed by having to click on your link before you reshare it. But that friction, having a chance to take that extra breath actually reduces the amount of toxic content that gets spread.

Tristan Harris: So that seems enormous, right? Because Facebook spend something like several billion dollars on this fact-checking and content moderation combined. So if you're saying we could actually do more good by making this sort of one-click change. Facetiously, I mean, the fact that, maybe two clicks, you can make this double reshare, and then after that you have to copy and paste. Couldn't they implement that immediately? Why would they not do that?

Frances Haugen: So for people who live in the United States, we take for granted the fact that there are some countries in the world where 35% of all the content people see in the news feed is just reshares. That in some places, people write a lot less original content or create a lot less original content. So reshares take up a lot more of the news feed in those places. So anything that decreases the volume of reshares, decreases Facebook's profits by little, tiny bits each time. So maybe that change would decrease Facebook's profits by 1%. And Facebook has come out, Facebook has trouble admitting that they have problems. But also it's a thing of, every dollar matters to Wall Street. And Facebook, because we haven't stepped in and said, Hey, this is a collaborative process. We're going to get congressional oversight involved. Facebook has been left optimizing for the shareholder interests instead of the public's interests.

Tristan Harris: It's hard for me because I'm like, this is the thing that they should implement tomorrow. I mean, basically this is something that is content

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agnostic, language agnostic, and something that would simply ... I mean, we're only talking about reducing their profits by 1%. And this would make the world a lot safer because you would just really rank down the kinds of things that are shared. I've shared on this podcast before, there's sort of a lore story about Steve Jobs. That when someone showed him one of the upcoming podcast apps for the iPhone and someone said, Hey, let's make it so that there's a newsfeed, so you can see the other podcasts that people have listened to. You can see what your friends have listened to, then you can comment and like on it.

Tristan Harris:

And he immediately responded, No. Why would you do that? If something was so genuinely important and worth listening to, people would say, 'I'm going to copy and paste a link to this podcast episode, and I'm going to send it to a friend.' And I just think about his belief in the genuine quality of something standing out. That it's not even just that we'd have an instant reshare button to 100 people, but that something would have to rise to the level of being so relevant, that I would send a link to a friend. And if I think about the things in my life, or things that I've been sent by friends, the quality is so much higher. If I think about Social Dilemma, so many people texted a Netflix link to their friend and said, You have to watch this. I mean Frances, your testimony was sent around by text to everyone around the world, because it was just so riveting and so compelling.

Tristan Harris:

And I think if we lived with the standard of what is so genuinely worth sharing, it's almost like the worth sharing movement. As opposed to the sharing everything, every little minor thought, every little minor twitch, every little neuron firing off. Having that shared to everyone just creates a mass society of noise. And I feel like that's what we're living in now is just a mass society of noise. And this is a tiny, tiny change that would make an enormous difference in every country, in every language. And it's not a one-click fix to the world, but it might be one click safer.

Frances Haugen:

Yeah. I think it's one of those things where this is a change that Facebook could show that they were serious about decreasing extreme, polarizing, divisive content very, very easily. And they could show that they're willing to trade off a very small amount of profits for the safety of the platform. And I think it's a wonderful, content-neutral, language-neutral solution. It's not about picking winners or losers. It's not about censorship. It's about changing the dynamics of the platform so that it's less twitchy and reactive. And it allows us to be thoughtful. And I think we want social media that helps us connect with people we care about. We want social media we enjoy. And I think that all those things are true about this change.

Tristan Harris:

So let's make this change. Let's make Facebook #oneclicksafer. The Center for Humane Technology is launching a campaign to pressure Facebook to allow a maximum of two levels of sharing per post. Back to

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Donella Meadows's framework, this lower leverage point is one we can push on immediately, while we advocate for longer-term systemic reforms. You can join our campaign at oneclicksafer.tech. And if you work at Facebook, we know there are so many of you who want to help. Share this episode. Advocate internally for making Facebook one click safer. Check out oneclicksafer.tech. Frances Haugen is a specialist in algorithmic product management, and an advocate for public oversight of social media. She believes the problems with social media are solvable, and that we can design social media that brings out the best in humanity. It took extraordinary courage and personal risk for Frances to blow the whistle against a \$1 trillion company. Please support her whistleblower protection by donating to Whistleblower Aid. Visit gofundme.com/f/facebook-whistleblower.

Tristan Harris:

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