

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast
Episode 43: [Behind the Curtain on The Social Dilemma](#)

Sen. Lindsey Graham: Have you seen the movie Social Dilemma?

Mark Zuckerberg: Senator, I'm familiar with it.

Sen. Lindsey Graham: Okay. Have you seen it, Mr. Dorsey?

Jack Dorsey: No, I have not.

Sen. Lindsey Graham: I would encourage both of you to see it.

Tristan Harris: That's Senator Lindsey Graham at a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing last November, where Facebook CEO, Mark Zuckerberg and Twitter CEO, Jack Dorsey, were testifying about regulating social media. And one question Senator Graham chose to ask them was whether they had seen The Social Dilemma. The Social Dilemma is an Emmy-Award-winning Netflix documentary about the dark consequences of the social media business model that featured me, Aza and the Center for Humane Technology team, and might actually be the way you learned about our work. The film unleashed an avalanche of efforts around the world to address the harms of social media, which we're still feeling the reverberations of today over one year later. 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. How do you make a film that impacts more than 100 million people in 190 countries and in 30 languages? Well, today we're going behind the curtain on The Social Dilemma with the film's director, Jeff Orlowski, and producer, Larissa Rhodes. Jeff and Larissa are based at Exposure Labs, a production company devoted to maximizing the impact of film.

Tristan Harris: Welcome to Your Undivided Attention. I am so excited for this episode. We have two incredible friends and incredible talented human beings with us today. Jeff Orlowski, the director of Social Dilemma and Larissa Rhodes who produced The Social Dilemma. These are the two people who we worked with the most on the film, and it's just unbelievable what has happened now more than a little over a year, since the film launched, having more than estimated 100 million viewers in 190 countries and 30 languages. Just won two Emmy Awards. Congratulations for best writing and best editing. First of all, how are you doing in this moment reflecting on where we are after the film?

Jeff Orlowski: Oh my goodness. First of all, it's great to see you again and to catch up and share all of this. It has been such a whirlwind this year. The last couple years have been such a whirlwind with this project. I think we

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always knew we were on to something very big from the beginning, but this completely exceeded our expectations, but I feel like Larissa and I are still just in a daze and just trying to keep up and the fire hose keeps overpowering us, but Larissa, how are you feeling?

Larissa Rhodes: Yeah. Well, thank you both so much for having us and for all the work that you've done. It obviously was a huge inspiration and what kick-started this journey to begin with. So I think as Jeff said, the fire hose and the waterfall analogies are all very real, but it's really exciting to see how far this story has gone.

Tristan Harris: I want to go back, Jeff, just to elaborate a little bit on the fact that you and I were the same year at Stanford. Some people are aware of this, but you and I were both Apple campus representatives, which means we were the people that were on campus representing Apple and Apple products and trying to get people at campus to care about Macs. And actually, Jeff Seibert, our mutual friend who became head of consumer product at Twitter, was also an Apple campus rep at Stanford. We were all optimistic about technology. I think you were saying, you thought you might even go into technology at some point.

Tristan Harris: But I just want to take people into what that world is for you and I specifically, because you and I in that year, our classmates were Mike Krieger and Kevin Systrom, the two co-founders of Instagram. You and I both had very close friends who joined Facebook very early. And there's a kind of awkwardness in there being a huge problem that we're all waking up to and suddenly, it involves your personal friends. I just think that's an interesting thread to pull and I was just curious if you had any other reflections about that.

Jeff Orlowski: Yeah, well, just briefly on the Apple side, I think a lot of my optimism for technology did come for my love of Apple computers in that era, that generation. That was like me in high school, working for the school newspaper, doing journalism on MacBooks and using the new operating system, like when OS X came out for the first time. And just seeing it's the analogy that we bring up in the film in the little nod to Steve Jobs in the film around a computer being a bicycle for the mind. And when you look at technology in its best application, how can it help you go further and faster than you can in your normal human body?

Jeff Orlowski: And so as you were saying, lots of mutual friends that went into the industry early on, and many of them that are still at many of these companies or executives are leading different companies. It became challenging while we were making the film to learn and assess who I could go to and who I could speak to. There were some friends that gave confidential, anonymous off-the-record interviews that were just

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background. There were some friends that didn't want to talk. There were some friends that I was really nervous to reach out to and tried to reach out, and then the call or the meeting never happened and I was like, "Phew. All right, I maybe dodged one over there."

Jeff Orlowski: And so for me, I think both with climate change and the way I started to learn and understand this issue from you and from the countless subjects that we met and spoke to, when you could sort of peek under the hood and understand the engine and know what's going on, when you see all of that, you know what the outcomes will be. It really is like you can just see the future. You know what the future's going to look like, because it is such simple math. We have the line in the film from Tim Kendall, the former head of monetization at Facebook and former president of Pinterest. There's a line in the film when we ask him, what is he most worried about? And he says, "Civil War."

Jeff Orlowski: And we had people internally, or people on the marketing teams for the film that were hesitant for us to reference that phrase. They were like, "Is that too extreme? Should we really be saying that?" And when January 6th happened, countless people came to us and we were like, "Wow, you really called this one." And it's like, "No, we're not trying to do a we told you so." This is just literally how Tim saw the simple logic of these incentive structures playing out over time.

Jeff Orlowski: And so I think for me, this journey over the last several years, going from those early days of how do we even navigate this? Who do we speak to? How do we learn about it? And then finding more and more confidence in the actual evidence itself in what we were learning in the way the technology was designed. I think that's what gave me confidence to continue going down the path and to speak affirmatively about this and having a stance that we put into the film, because we could see and understand one lens of how this technology works.

Tristan Harris: I'm so glad you're bringing this up because I think taking us back in time, people forget that it was not a common view to be critical that social media might be a guiding hand on the steering wheel of human history and would be setting the terms of mental health or elections. I mean, that's so obvious to everyone now in the agenda, but the idea that there was even something wrong.

Jeff Orlowski: I was so nervous talking about this project for the first year and a half. I mean, I would dance around it. It's like, "What do you think of the about social media? Manipulative techniques or tech addiction." I would dance around the phrase tech addiction in 2017 with friends who worked at these companies, just trying to get an assessment of where do people stand and are they still at these companies? I remember being so

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stressed that whole time around, how do we even build a team to make this movie? I guess there's something to flag here as well. There were a lot of people that were speaking out critical of tech, but our goal was not just to criticize tech.

Jeff Orlowski:

There were lots of people that we considered and ruled out because the criticisms that people had were around either downstream outcomes or were on different aspects. We really tried to hone in on the business model. What is fundamentally wrong with this business model? One of the things I do regret, we didn't know about Safiya Noble at the time and her book, Algorithms of Oppression. I really do wish we had Safiya Noble in the film because she does speak through oppression through the exact business model, frame, and lens that we landed on.

Aza Raskin:

I was just going to say, what I think most people don't realize is how fast the world was changing and how fast you guys, as a film team, had to be working.

Larissa Rhodes:

That's a good point, Aza. I mean, I think it's easy to forget where the technology was and where it is now and where the conversation was. And I think that was actually one of the most difficult parts for the film team, because every time we would do a new interview, the technology had changed. The conversation had shifted. There was a new leak somewhere or some other technology had changed or shifted. So that was a challenge to keep up with, and I think what we recognized is we didn't need to keep up with it because there was still this fundamental underlying thesis of where the problem was.

Jeff Orlowski:

I remember there was one point we had just started filming. I remember Tristan, you guys were just launching the Center for Humane Technology. We were filming Roger McNamee at the time, we were following him, and we were following a couple different threads and stories. And soon after all of that, it was getting launched and just getting rolling, that's when Facebook changed. They were like, "We want to dedicate our time to time well spent, and we're going to change our algorithm and we're going to shift to meaningful social interactions." And we now see in hindsight what that did, but going back to early 2018, I remember thinking and saying to Larissa like, "What if this gets solved before we finish making this movie?"

Tristan Harris:

I remember you saying that to me, because people don't understand how much was changing in real time. Cambridge Analytica was coming out. The very first Senate hearings happened while you were filming. As you said, Apple and Google both launched digital wellbeing features and all the screen time features and everything was changing in real time. And I remember you saying like, "Is this film going to be relevant by the

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time that it's out?" But then focusing on the core generator functions of what causes these things.

Aza Raskin: And remember that a number of the interviews happened two years before the film came out.

Jeff Orlowski: Oh yeah. Most of the interviews were in early 2018 to mid-2018. That first spring and summer, there was nervousness around like, is this going to be relevant whatsoever? Is this going to be solved and outdated? I think that's what kept pushing us towards... It was a strategic choice, but I think it made sense for the film. We really tried to stay away from any of the news and the news cycles. The commentary we were trying to reflect on was not a matter of like, who did the latest thing and what was the latest thing to come out from what company?

Jeff Orlowski: We were really trying to look at what is the fundamental underlying problem? What is the problem that's not going away? That's not being addressed? That's not being solved? And that's what kept bringing us back to the business model. And the clear misalignment and incentive with the business model into society. So that kept being the driving force and that kept giving me, and I think the whole team more confidence around like, we're saying something here that I don't think is going to go away anytime soon.

Larissa Rhodes: One of the big moments early on when we were thinking about what this film really was and how it connected to the work that we were doing, I still wasn't honestly totally sold on how this issue was as important as an issue like climate change. There was a search that we did in Google actually, and I remember typing in with Jeff sitting next to me on our computer. Climate change is space, and the autofill results after 10 years working in climate, were not real, fake and a hoax. And I thought, "How is this possible? How can this be?"

Larissa Rhodes: And that was the Genesis for me, recognizing that these technologies are really shaping obviously our information ecosystem and they're as polluted as our environmental ecosystem. And that for me, was the foundational issue that got me and a bunch of other people who were on our team who have been interested in climate for so long to really recognize that this is a foundational issue.

Larissa Rhodes: I think you should talk about the avatar because I think that was really a moment where for the production team, the story clicked for us. It was a true visual example of what was happening behind the curtain on the other side of your phone of what was really going on. And I think now everybody knows what we talk about algorithms, and we know what they mean, but at the time... My parents were both computer software

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engineers, Bell Labs and AT&T style, and I could not explain to someone what an algorithm was. And I think this visual example that Aza and Tristan you helped share with us was the nugget that allowed us to think through this narrative that Jeff and the writing team ultimately created.

Jeff Orlowski:

Let me take a step back even, because part of where that started was, I'm a huge fan of Adam McKay and his work and *The Big Short* in my mind, it's such a brilliant film that took a very, very complicated subject and made it very accessible. How do you explain those financial instruments in a narrative movie and what they ended up doing, they ended up breaking the wall and they brought in other actors and celebrities to help in funny ways and in various ways, explain the nuts and bolts of what somebody needed to understand for the movie to make sense.

Jeff Orlowski:

And early on, I was sharing with Larissa, what's the documentary version of *The Big Short*? How do we flip that model? How do we inverse that and what could we do in a documentary that would take these complicated concepts and make them more accessible and more lighthearted and more available to the audience? And originally, we were thinking just about skits. At the start, the idea was like, "Oh, imagine, all right, Will Ferrell's in a stage and he's got a whole bunch of computer systems and he's there and he's trying to get the human on the other side." That literally was one of the earliest ideas that we were riffing on and it was riffing through that idea and countless other ideas around like-

Larissa Rhodes:

Betty White. We wanted to have Betty White explain algorithms. I thought that would be really funny.

Jeff Orlowski:

That was another idea, but it was really like just being super creative and out of the box and explaining the things that an audience needs to understand. And I remember one day I was sitting on a plane and I was just journaling and writing some ideas down and I realized all of those little vignettes could be interwoven into a singular story and we can actually accomplish multiple goals at the same time through one narrative arc that would allow us to drop into all of these insights that we need to explain to the audience, or in some cases, just give the audience space around okay, we just dropped seven minutes of really heady heavy stuff and you just need a little bit of breathing room to let that process and internalize before we get to the next section.

Jeff Orlowski:

And so it was that theme and idea that for me and for the team were the way that we could make this concept all the more accessible and provide inroads for anybody, regardless if somebody watches documentaries or not, regardless of if you know anything about

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technology or not, hopefully there's a place that you see yourself in the story and you find an easy access point into the story.

Aza Raskin: I think of our job as communicators. Imagine a big sphere of all the things which are thinkable and outside of that are the things which are unthinkable. And then inside of that big sphere of thinkable things, there are things that are imaginable, that are visceral, that you can touch. And it's our job to take things that are unthinkable and make them thinkable and then take them from the thinkable and finally make them understandable, touchable, feelable. A phrase we often use is to make the invisible visceral. I think the film was very honest that it starts with what is the problem? And we're trying to figure out how do we describe it.

Aza Raskin: I remember the moment that it hit me like, oh, I think is when you were starting to ask these questions about like, "How do you describe what is an algorithm?" And it's like, "Well, it's a whole bunch of matrix multiplication that's just not very gripping." But when you can describe it as, there are little avatars of each one of us sitting in the servers of Facebook and Google and Twitter. And the avatar starts by not looking very much like us, but they collect our hair clippings and our toe clips and our click trails. And that thing looks more and more and more like us until it can predict us better than we can predict ourselves.

Aza Raskin: And there's one of these voodoo dolls for one out of three human beings on earth. And all of a sudden, it's gone from like, what is privacy? I don't know. How do I care? Show me where on my body privacy hurt me. To, oh, that's gross. I don't want Facebook having that kind of asymmetric power. And then I remember going on a walk with you, Jeff, around Berkeley, as you were describing, taking that idea and turning it into this full matrix world model. And then to watch that go from there to something that when I talk to people about The Social Dilemma, they always reference those sets of scenes as the most impactful things when they can finally understand the power of it.

Larissa Rhodes: Well, I was just going to add that. I think other elements, all of the elements I should say, of the narrative portion of the film are based in that same reality and in that same experience and real fact, the character that is Ben that is played by Skyler Gisondo is based on stories that are real, stories of people falling down rabbit holes. We really did try to base all of the narrative portions of the film in this reality, whether that was true pieces that we had read or interviews with experts off the record.

Aza Raskin: I'd love to shift the conversation to what did the film do? I'd love to start with just some personal stories of impact before we shift to the bigger,

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like what happened in the world because of the film. For me, one was at Sundance. We watched the film with 1500, 2000 Salt Lake City High School students. And we'd seen the film now a couple of times with adults and they were affected, but they were not affected at all like the high school students. And I remember the entire cast getting up on stage, the light in our eyes, this auditory full of high school students. And they would get up one by one and say things like, and their voice is quivering, "I've had a friend that committed suicide because of this." Or, "I've had a friend that's become radicalized because of YouTube." Or, "I can't get enough time with my parents," because they're addicted to their phones. And hearing the emotion in their voice was just a transformative moment for me. So that was just one snapshot.

Aza Raskin:

And another one was a couple months later, I guess, over a year later after the film came out, Tristan and I were in Hawaii and we met a couple that told us the film had saved their relationship. And we're like, "How could it have saved your relationship?" And they're like, "Well..." So one of them is a black man. The other partner is a white woman and they just had completely different worldviews. He was getting a newsfeed full of police beating Black Lives Matter protestors. And she was getting a news feed full of protestors and writers seemingly breaking into black-owned businesses.

Aza Raskin:

And each one was getting fed an infinite feed of first-person perspectives, reinforcing their worldviews. And they were just arguing and arguing and arguing. And they're about to split up. They watched The Social Dilemma, realized they could swap their news feeds. There's that line, which is you don't understand someone until you've walked 1000 miles in their news. Getting to see that in fact were all seeing different things, and that's why they were disagreeing, let them save their relationship. And I can just imagine all the different relationships across the U.S. and the world where something very similar happened.

Larissa Rhodes:

Yeah. I mean, I can go first, Jeff. I think working in documentaries it's not like they're rolling out the red carpet and there's a whole world of people that are usually seeing your films. Usually there's a small group of people who will watch your films, who are die-hard fans because they care about the issue or more likely they're your parents or your best friends or your neighbors that know you're making films. And in this case, I can't tell you how many people have reached out to me from all walks of life, strangers on the street, people that my husband gets his hair cut from. I am hearing stories from literally everybody I know, and not in the way of, "Oh, we're so proud of you for making this project." It is, it gets right to the issue of recognizing how deeply ingrained technology is in our lives and how it really is affecting every single person, even if you're not on social media anymore.

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Jeff Orlowski: Yeah. I echo a lot of your comments there, Larissa. I think some of the big things too, the things that I'm most both proud of. And I think there's the biggest opportunity is just how much the political landscape has shifted over the last year, where if you compare the Senate hearings with some of the CEOs from a couple of years ago, where it seemed like Congress people and senators didn't even know what the business model was or how they made money compared to March of this year, compared to the most recent hearings with Frances Haugen, there's a very clear and pretty rapid learning that policy makers around the world are going through around, wait a second, we let this one go too far and we need to rein it in and policy makers across both sides of the aisle here in the United States are very eager around finding those shared places of overlap and consensus around, what do we need to do to rein in this beast?

Jeff Orlowski: And I think that's one of the things where we've engaged with countless policy makers, whether doing screenings and events, or just talking back channeling and supplying insights and connecting them to people that we've met in our network and resources. Now we've done events with attorneys general and presented in front of attorneys general, which I'm also very optimistic about the angle that AGs could potentially take and what legislation could look like. So I mean, the individual stories and anecdotes are so immense and impossible to keep up with. And I think really the fact that we were able to play a role in this zeitgeist, in the changing conversation around where we are at this extremely critical time, in the way a handful of tech companies are completely morphing our information ecosystem. This is the issue of our time. This is why we made the movie. This is why we put the time and energy and dedication into this.

Jeff Orlowski: Those early conversations that Larissa and I had around, well, wait a second, climate change. We've been working on climate change for years and years and years, we realized you can't solve climate change unless you solve this problem and pick your poison, whatever issue you care about, whatever is your cause. That issue is probably only going to get more and more polarized in this existing information landscape. And we can't solve any of those things without addressing this. Just the fact that people are sensing that and waking up to that has been a huge, huge encouragement.

Tristan Harris: Yeah. Totally. I mean, when I go back to launch day. So September 9th, I believe, 2020, I wake up and I don't know if some people remember this, but it was the day that San Francisco had this apocalyptic red sky. We'd actually had about three or four weeks of wildfires in California at that time. I mean, it was just an awful... And we'd been preparing all

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summer thinking about the release of the film and how could we be ready for it and wake up the day that the film is out. And it's just this apocalyptic red sky and AZA joked. And I remember a phone call that morning that we took out a full page ad in the sky because the film is kind of apocalyptic. And then I just remember the story is starting to come in. The grand irony is how addicted I got to searching for people's reactions to The Social Dilemma on Twitter, because it was like watching.

Tristan Harris:

I talked to Justin Rosenstein about this, who's the creator of the like button. I mean, we're both sitting there watching people's reactions of just being mind blown. And almost like it was almost psychedelic experience. The internet became aware of itself. It was like the internet could see itself and not be immersed in itself. It could actually be above itself and see itself and see what the mechanics of it were. And it was just so profound to watch that happen at scale. I mean, you couldn't do that in any other previous time, right? The irony is without social media, you wouldn't actually be able to see all those reactions at scale and every language.

Tristan Harris:

I mean, one of the things that was fascinating that I don't think anyone of us expected was the way that the film, I think, uniquely went viral on social media, because think about another film that you see that was really impactful in your life, a documentary that changed your life. There's certainly some that have changed mine, but after I see a really moving film, my first move isn't to go online and say, "Everyone has to see this film." Even if it's a really good film, that wouldn't necessarily be the first thing that I would do. But the interesting thing about this film is that because it was about social media, ironically is telling you to close it down and what a threat it is. The first thing that I think almost everyone did is they posted about it on social media. And so its unique traction at being, I think, within the top record-breaking documentaries of all time on Netflix, ironically was because the film was about social media.

Tristan Harris:

When Tim Cook announced Apple's basically privacy protecting features that go after the surveillance based business models that are the problem, he actually said in his speech, "We cannot allow a social dilemma to become a social catastrophe." Features like that, when Apple makes a move like that, that's an example of real impact. That's not just a one-liner, that's Apple changing the rules of the game of what it means to participate inside of an ecosystem. And I love pointing to examples like that. I mean, I know I remember getting emails from political friends in Washington, D.C. saying how much Social Dilemma had changed the conversation.

Tristan Harris:

I know that several Congress members have hosted big watch parties and screenings for many members. I know there was a Hamilton rap

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song that's actually personal for me because I'm a huge fan of the Hamilton musical and Renee Elise Goldsberry who plays one of the Schuyler sisters, has an amazing rap, a variant of I Put a Spell on You by Nina Simone. I know a prime minister of a major country reached out to one of the executive producers, Heather Reisman, to say how much the film had impacted him. And he watched the film three times. I actually met someone from the CIA who had seen the film and had recommended it to the next incoming administration and tried to get a screening there. There's just 100 stories like this.

Jeff Orlowski:

Yeah. I love hearing you rattle through those. It's also just so weird because that's what the whole year has been like. I'm not trying to be boastful for us, but this has above and beyond exceeded expectations that we ever could have in our wildest imaginations dreamed of. I have such respect for Frances Haugen and the stream of whistle blowers that have come out over the course of this year, and Sophie Zhang and others that are just continuing to keep that pressure on and continuing to beat the drum of like, wait a second, there is a huge misalignment here. There's a big problem here. And I am still hopeful for social media that we want to use that is designed around the Dunbar number. That's designed around my closest friends and family that make my life richer and more fulfilled.

Tristan Harris:

I really want to credit the brilliance of what you guys did in that. I remember talking to several foundations, philanthropists, about creating impact campaigns around documentaries. And when you talk to these philanthropic funders, they say, "Oh yeah, a documentary, we've got a graveyard of documentaries that tried to change or impact society in a meaningful way. And most of them just don't get watched. And most of them it's like a brief blip." And I think one of the things I really appreciated with both of you is how much you were really trying to figure out what would be the kind of film that everyone would watch, that everyone would relate to? That it's just a bunch of talking heads talking for two hours about brilliant important stuff. That's not going to be engaging. And you came up with the narrative of the family and telling the story through the lens of how a family, a real-world family was transformed.

Tristan Harris:

As you're learning about how the algorithms work, you're seeing that family, you're seeing Ben, as you mentioned, Larissa, the teenage guy go down the rabbit hole and kind of get radicalized. And you see the videos on his wall of climate change. Is it real? It's not, that's the point they want you to believe. And people relate to... Each person has touched one of those things. They either have a daughter who saw their daughter delete a photo of themselves because they didn't get as many likes. What I just really appreciated is telling both sides of the story, the

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story of the person in front of the glass, and then the story of the machines behind the glass.

Larissa Rhodes:

I think one of the most interesting pieces about the film is that not only are there so many aspects to this issue, and I think that's what people gravitate towards. Everybody can talk about a different portion of what this issue is and how it affects them. I think in thinking about how many people worked on this film and all the different crafts that went into it, whether that's the sound design and the sound mixing, whether that's the music, whether that's the cinematography and the choices for how the interviews and the cameras were laid out, there was so much thought that went into, how can we craft this in a way that will show people really the journey that Jeff and I and the rest of our team went on when we learned about these issues? So I just have to say huge kudos and thank you to that crew because it really did change, I think, the way that this narrative ultimately ended up and the way that it is now landing with people.

Aza Raskin:

I would love to know, as a pause for reflection, what would you guys do differently if you were making it again today? I think a lot about when I talk to people, they will tell me mostly about the first half of the film. They'll talk about their tech addiction, the individual stuff. And I won't hear as much about the second half when it starts almost pointing the finger, just a little shy of pointing the finger directly at capitalism, is going from business models talking about... Justin has that line around so long as the whales-

Tristan Harris:

The whales and the trees.

Justin:

We live in a world in which a tree is worth more financially dead than alive, in a world in which a whale is worth more dead than alive. For so long as our economy works in that way and corporations go unregulated, they're going to continue to destroy trees, to kill whales, to mine the earth and to continue to pull oil out of the ground, even though we know it is destroying the planet and we know that it's going to leave a worse world for future generations.

Aza Raskin:

And so I'm curious. I know this is two different questions. What would you do differently making it today? And also, is there any further that you would push it?

Larissa Rhodes:

I would just jump in and say, if Jeff could still be editing this film, he probably would be, I think we were really pushing to get the film out, because we felt like the conversation needed to start happening, but there's certainly so much that is left on the cutting room floor, so many interviews that we couldn't squeeze in. I remember an interview with Dr.

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Marion Wolf who wrote a book and in one of the interviews, she was talking through how the culture of skimming has changed the way that we process information and that we are unable to make sense of the world and think deeply because we are seeing too much too rapidly to really process things. And so there are so many interviews that I think ended up on the cutting room floor. And I think for that reason, like Safiya Noble deserves her own movie. There are so many people that are working on these issues that it's near impossible, I think, to include everything in one film.

Tristan Harris:

I think the film is so well articulated in the core thing that it was trying to get people to get. There's so many other voices that we could include and should be included in this conversation. And that's certainly a hard thing is one of the main critiques of the film. And there's so many researchers and academics that do foundational work that informs so many of the things that other people in the film might talk about, right? I mean, whether it's the academics who do all the work on polarization and the cognitive biases that get abused and how... Not just that fake news spreads six times faster than true news, but that people remember something that was false more than they can remember something that might be true if it's salacious. There's so many academics, there's so many law professors, so many science technology studies folks, who have been saying and critiquing various aspects of this for a long time.

Tristan Harris:

I want to honor all those people who've done that really important work that also feeds into our work. I do think that you guys made a really strategic choice though, in the people that you did choose to include. And I think it might be worth talking about that a little bit, which is there's something powerful about having the insiders who were there at the time who could talk about the decisions that were made that has a unique persuasive impact. In the history of tobacco, it wasn't when the surgeon general said, "This is bad for us," that society turned. It was when the documents came out, that they knew what they were doing with nicotine and the addiction that they knew they were generating and that they knew they were going after kids. And it's the insider stories that are from a rhetorical and persuasive power to create a cultural awakening are uniquely powerful.

Jeff Orlowski:

I always pictured the trailer name dropping all of the tech companies. The idea of like, I worked at Facebook, Google, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube. That was the whole angle in my mind from the beginning around, oh, people might tune into this because of the credibility carried through these insiders who were talking about the thing that they took part in. After we did all those interviews, that's when it was like, basically everybody here's a white guy with a couple of exceptions. And

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that's when we actually started doing all the additional research around who else is in the space?

Jeff Orlowski: It took me months to get Shoshana Zuboff on board. It was also during those phases, that's where we met Rashida Richardson, who's in the film, Cynthia Wong, Anna Lembke. And so it started with who are the insiders that we can find and get to speak on the record. And then after that, it was like, okay, what are the other voices that we're missing? How can we round this out? What are the other stories? And of course, as you were saying, Tristan, there are so many more people that I wish we had known or met or had figured out how to integrate into the film. And that's part of the challenge of just how nuanced the whole subject is.

Larissa Rhodes: I was also going to add to that. I think that is one of the exciting things about documentary and also one of the challenging things about documentaries, when if you have time and you are open, the story can lead you places. And I think the perfect example of that is Rashida, who, I think Tristan, you were testifying at a Senate hearing and she actually was one of the witnesses there. And we actually met her at that time and then we're able to follow up with her. And she was very busy, but she finally said yes. And we were able to get an interview with her.

Larissa Rhodes: So I think that's an example of just if you're open and the story will lead you. But I think Jeff is right. There are so many other people that we could have included. And not just to your point, Tristan, the subject matter experts in terms of academics. But I think there's a lot of people who have been harmed by these issues. There's a lot of people who are activists who are working on the front lines to try to change some of these things. So just recognizing that the movement is so much larger than the film. And there are, as Jeff pointed out so many films about these issues, from Coded Bias to A Thousand Cuts, to The Great Hack, all of those other filmmakers trying to elevate these stories.

Jeff Orlowski: And I think ultimately that's my... We made one movie as a small team, just trying to shine a light on an issue. We need dozens and dozens and dozens. We need hundreds of films about these issues. We're receiving lots of people that are developing their own projects that are trying to figure out their own stories, figuring out new angles and fresh angles to tell. We're trying to help and support a lot of these endeavors, just so that they can all be made, that people can tell all of the nuanced stories that exist in this space.

Tristan Harris: One of the reasons, Jeff, I think I and so many other people believe that change is possible. That's kind of interesting. If you think about our personal backgrounds of knowing some of the people who made these products, is we see that they're just people. I know who Mike Krieger is.

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He's an amazing human being. He's one of the co-founders of Instagram. I know Justin Rosenstein who created the like button who's in the film. Together we know so many of the human beings, these regular human beings who made choices that they didn't know what they were doing at the time. They could have made different choices and they could make different choices. And believing in the power of human choices from human beings, rather than let the machines hold the pen in history is the kind of thing that we're demanding here.

Tristan Harris:

And I think one reason for that is because we happen to know some of those regular human beings who are behind the scenes, who wrote those initial lines of code. In saying that, I don't want people to think that I'm suggesting that without regulation, they will do those things. It's just that when we make either the next generation of technology, or we went back in time, we see that there was choice there. You could have made these things a different way. And I think that's where, to kind of bring it full circle, in anchoring in our story of seeing these guys at Stanford in 2006, and my friends who were starting many of these companies in 2007, 2008, 2009, I just remember these moments when it could have gone a different way. That's one thing that came to mind.

Aza Raskin:

One of the big ideas for me having worked on this is that these technologies are not some inevitable march of progress. And I think that's how it's been framed. And that's how the public thinks of it is that we are just on this exponential technological growth curve that has some predetermined future. No, not at all. These are business choices and business decisions that are made that are determining what these companies look like to a large degree, right? Business choices that go hand in hand with design choices that go hand in hand with where the technology is available and what it can allow, but it can look completely differently. And I think that's the thing that kept giving me hope and optimism for a different lens on this technology, in a different world view that we live in.

Jeff Orlowski:

We put you both through some torturous filming processes. This is what the film process is, but I mean, Tristan, your interviews, the first round of your interviews, I think were three full days of pretty much nonstop sitting in the hot seat interrogation. And then we did multiple pickup interviews, not to mention just following you around for your life for many, many months on end. And we're just like flies on the wall, attaching to your hip, following what you're doing day in and day out, literally like knock on the door early in the morning before you brush your teeth, just bombarding you while you're still in PJs, just following everything. One of the things I remember talking through with you was trying to prepare you a little bit for like, just how intense of a process this is. We're going to be deeply embedded in your life and all of your

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lives for a good chunk of time. This is not a one and done. We're going to be hanging around.

Jeff Orlowski:

And I remember actively wanting to make sure you were down for that and to the best to agree that I could, make sure you knew the endeavor that we were going to undertake here. I don't envy being in front of the camera. I do prefer, I find it easier to be behind the camera, but it's a huge amount of work that any non-fiction film subject has to go through both in terms of inviting access to one's life and one's thoughts and not having control of the final product and not knowing where it might go. And is there trust with this team or not, or is this team going to totally ruin everything that I'm working on? And I recognize you probably had those questions as well at different times. So I just want to thank you, I guess, for the trust that you and the whole team and all of the subjects extended with myself and Larissa and trusting us to tell the story.

Tristan Harris:

You guys are incredible. I do remember when we first started, I think it was in a hotel room in New York and you showed up, knocked on my door at 7:00 in the morning when I was doing some big interview at CBS News or something like that. And you first put the lav mic down my shirt and hooked the thing into my back pocket, the audio pack, whatever it is. And I was like, "Wait a second, is this actually going to happen? You mean you're going to start recording my life and you're going to be behind me and everything I say?" And it's an intimate process to have all this happen at the same time. And I appreciate in light of our north star of being more humane, that there's an interior and exterior part of this work for each of us.

Tristan Harris:

And I also know just how grueling it was for both of you and for everybody who worked on your team so hard to get this film across the finish line and to really wake up the world. And I think that you've just absolutely done that. And the world owes you a tremendous gratitude for helping educate so many people and drawing more attention to it in ways that create invisible seeds that continue to transform the world that we're living in.

Jeff Orlowski:

I remember we wrapped one of the interviews one day and we were having dinner together as a crew. And we got to talking about like, what is all of this for? How can we maximize, how can we get more out of life? How do we live deeper, richer, fuller lives? And so much of that for me, seeing you go through that process and for us as a team, trying to learn and catch up and figure out what are we saying here? The opportunity around humane technology, the opportunity around technology helping us be the most full versions of ourselves. I just remember feeling so drawn to that and recognizing like, it doesn't have to be this way and it

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shouldn't be this way. And I want a world that gives us something much more fulfilling and much richer.

Larissa Rhodes: Yeah, I would add to that. I am so deeply grateful for the both of you and for all of the other documentary subjects and all of the people that aren't in the film, but that are working on this issue because it really has changed the way that I live my life. It has changed the way that my family and my friends interact, and that is happening at scale in a way that I don't think I could have ever envisioned or imagined. So I just want to say thank you to you both because it really has been incredibly meaningful.

Aza Raskin: Likewise, it has been such a honor to work with both of you.

Tristan Harris: Exposure Labs is a production company devoted to maximizing the impact of film. Larissa Rhodes is their producer and head of creative development. And Jeff Orlowski is their director and founder. There were countless others involved in making The Social Dilemma, including executive producers, Heather Reisman, Laurie David, Linda and David Cornfield, Writer Vickie Curtis, David Coombe, and so many others. So a huge thank you to the hundreds of people who were involved in making this film possible.

Tristan Harris: A new 40-minute version of The Social Dilemma for educators is now freely available online. You can register your classroom screening or event at thesocialdilemma.com/educators. Your Undivided Attention is produced by the Center for Humane Technology. Our executive producer is Stephanie Lepp, and our associate producer is Noor Al-Samarrai. Dan Kedmey is our editor at large. Original music and sound design by Ryan and Hays Holladay, and a special thanks to the whole Center for Humane Technology team for making this podcast possible. And a very special thanks goes to our generous lead supporters, including the Omidyar Network, Craig Newmark Philanthropies, and the Evolve Foundation, among many others.

Tristan Harris: And remember that rap song I mentioned, here's a clip of Brandi Carlile and Renée Elise Goldsberry's rap remix of Nina Simone's I Put a Spell on You, as a tribute to The Social Dilemma.

Tristan Harris: (singing)

Tristan Harris: I'm Tristan Harris. And if you made it all the way here, let me just give one more thank you to you for giving us your undivided attention.

Tristan Harris: (singing).

