

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast
Episode 40: [What is Civil War in the Digital Age?](#)

Aza Raskin: In early 2019, when presidential campaigning was barely underway, MSNBC commentator, Donny Deutsch, said that, "If impeached or voted out, Donald Trump might initiate a civil war."

Donny Deutsch: I believe Donald Trump is not beyond starting a civil war. Chris, I think we are really headed for a very ugly time in American history.

Aza Raskin: In October of 2021, a year after Trump had lost the election, Tucker Carlson posted a video on Twitter. It was a trailer for a documentary series called Patriot Purge, which suggested that the government is using the events of January 6th to go after Trump voters.

Clip from Patri...: The left is hunting the right. Sticking them in Guantanamo Bay, for American citizens, leaving them there to rot.

Aza Raskin: If you believe the other side was hunting you or about to initiate a civil war, if you felt under attack, what would you do?

Aza Raskin: I'm Aza Raskin.

Tristan Harris: I'm Tristan Harris.

Aza Raskin: And this is Your Undivided Attention, the podcast from the Center for Humane Technology. Civil war might be the most likely escalation pathway towards disaster for a country. On the flip side, learning how to avoid civil war, and more ambitiously, repair our civic fabric may be the highest leverage for addressing the challenges we face.

Aza Raskin: Our guest today is Barbara F. Walter. One of the world's leading experts on civil wars, political violence, and terrorism. Barbara is a professor of international affairs at UC San Diego and her latest book, *How Civil Wars Start: And How to Stop Them*, identifies the conditions that give rise to modern civil war in order to address them.

Aza Raskin: Barbara, I'm so excited to have you on Your Undivided Attention. Since reading your book, I really feel like this is one of the most important conversations that we can be having. I think civil violence is both one of the most likely escalation pathways for things in the US falling apart, but also, if we can solve it, it's one of the highest leverage points for addressing like almost all of our problems. Because if we can repair our civic fabric, we're more able to address, climate, refugees, pollution, inequality, those biggest problems are problems of collective coordination.

Aza Raskin: So your book is called *How Civil Wars Start: And How to Stop Them*. And actually this is sort of where I want to start, because it's really easy, in a sense, to see how, when we write about something, whatever we write about, it makes it

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more likely that thing comes true. And so I sort of thought that maybe the place we should start is how do we responsibly talk about the likelihood of civil war without also making it more likely to happen? But I just want to start there.

Barbara F Walte...: So this is the big question that everybody has been asking me. And I do think for people who are deeply cynical or are partisan, the book has ended up being perceived as a partisan book. This is alarmist. This is hyperbolic. This is actually leading us towards civil war. And I had thought a lot about that while I was writing the book, and whether this was the responsible thing to do, and was the best way to actually lead to peace and prevent war. And I'm absolutely convinced it's the latter.

Barbara F Walte...: And there's really two responses. One is that the CIA task force that I was on for many years, which its goal was to figure out what the warning signs of civil war were, so that the US government could keep a watch on these countries that had the risk factors. The US did not want them to descend into instability, and didn't want them to experience political violence and civil war. And so knowing what the risk factors were, gave the United States a chance to help its allies try to prevent this. So it clearly believed that these warning factors were important, because it gave these countries time to try to turn it around. And that's the way I think people should think about it.

Barbara F Walte...: The second thing is political scientists have this term called the security dilemma. And a lot of people have said, "Oh, Walter's book is creating this security dilemma." And the security dilemma is when you have a situation where two groups or two countries really, really don't want war, they want peace. But because you're uncertain about people's motivations and their intentions, you're watching them trying to determine, is this a peaceful country? Or is this a peaceful group? You don't really know.

Barbara F Walte...: And you see them beginning to arm themselves. And you don't know if this is because they feel insecure and they want to protect themselves, or they're arming themselves, because they actually want to go to war. This makes you nervous. This makes you more insecure. So you start arming yourself. And of course your counterpart is now watching you arm yourself. This makes them even more nervous. They start purchasing more weapons. And it creates this arms spiral.

Barbara F Walte...: That is not the situation that the United States is in today. We don't have two groups who have no desire for war and are just feeling uncertain and insecure. We have violent extremists here in the United States that want war. They're called accelerationists. They are advertising the fact that they want civil war and they're very, very clear and upfront about it. So when you have a situation where one group does actually want war, is organizing for war, is stockpiling weapons, is recruiting members, then to ignore them thinking that the problem

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will go away, is the worst possible strategy, because chaos results and chaos is very much to their advantage.

Tristan Harris: Thank you for sharing all that. I love your book. I found self highlighting, just constantly, different points that you were making. I just want to recommend, for those who are concerned about the kind of trends that drive us in these directions, I just found it so illuminating to have all these different examples of where these factors show up. So thank you for writing it.

Tristan Harris: So let's define our terms. How do you define civil war versus domestic conflict? And other terms here, just so that people understand what we're talking about, what constitutes it. And then we'd love to go into what are the components, the generators, the drivers that push us in that direction.

Barbara F Walte...: Civil war is actually an umbrella term for all sorts of different types of domestic political violence. Coups come under civil war. Those are the smallest, least violent, but it goes all the way to social revolution. And then there's all sorts of stuff in the middle, including insurgencies. So civil wars, the way we defined it is really very simple. You can have a major civil war. You can have a minor civil war. The major civil wars are conflicts that are fought between at least one group in society against the central government. And that produces a total of a 1,000 deaths in the course of the war and at least a 100 deaths per year. Minor armed conflicts, which I don't study, and they didn't inform this book. They only have to produce 25 deaths a year, which to me is a different phenomenon.

Barbara F Walte...: So that's the definition. What's different about the wars today is that a typical 21st century civil war is an insurgency. It's decentralized. It's not going to be fought by an organized, large rebel group where both sides are wearing uniforms and they have a very clear chain of a command. You have multiple and sometimes hundreds of small factions, militias, paramilitary groups that are operating all over a country. Sometimes they're coordinating their activities, and sometimes they're not. This is what happened in Syria. This is what happened in Iraq. This is what happened in Afghanistan.

Barbara F Walte...: And they don't want to engage the government directly. And that's because the government and its military is almost always much, much stronger than these groups. So they prefer to avoid direct engagement, and instead use non-conventional tactics like terrorism and guerrilla warfare to try to sort of get at the soft underbelly of these countries. That's the type of modern 21st century civil war that we see around the world, and that we would almost certainly see here.

Aza Raskin: I think from here, maybe it would be good to jump into what are the generator functions, the risk factors that give rise to civil war?

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Barbara F Walte...: I was on this task force called the Political Instability Task Force from 2017 to the end of 2021. And our goal was to put together this predictive model, where around the world civil war was likely to break out. And when the model was created, it was created by a room filled with people, and half the room were experts on civil war and half the room were data analysts. And what they wanted to know is, "Okay, tell us what all the studies out there say about what could potentially be important. Just tell us about all the quantitative studies, what were the variables that were significant?"

Barbara F Walte...: And it turns out that there were over 30 different variables that the data analysts played with to try to determine what the best model was going to be. And of all of these variables, two were incredibly important. And the first one was this thing called anocracy. An anocracy is just a fancy term for partial democracy. It's governments that are neither fully democratic, nor fully autocratic, they're something in between. And in particular it was certain types of partial democracies that were really at risk.

Barbara F Walte...: It was partial democracies whose elections were free, but not entirely fair. Where popular participation is not entirely open, if you were a Catholic living or even a Protestant living in Northern Ireland, you were not operating under a full democracy.

Barbara F Walte...: And then the second factor that was really important in the model was this thing we called ethnic factionalism. And ethnic factionalism was when citizens in a country began to organize politically, not around ideology. So they didn't form a socialist party and a liberal party around a particular set of political issues, but they formed their parties around identity. Either you had ethnically based, religiously based, or racially based parties.

Barbara F Walte...: And it was this combination countries whose governments were anocracies, but whose political parties were also ethnically, religiously, or racially based, those were the ones that were at highest risk of civil war. And you also saw this ethnic factionalism in Northern Ireland, where the political parties in Northern Ireland divided exactly along religious lines. If you were Catholic, you voted for the Catholic party, you would never, ever shift and vote for the Protestant party. And the same was true if you were Protestant. So there was nowhere for you to go as a voter except for your own religious party.

Aza Raskin: One of the things I think your book points out is there's a study from the International Institute of Democracy and Electoral Assistance that in 2021 found that for the fifth consecutive year, the number of countries moving in an authoritarian direction, exceeded the number of countries moving in a democratic direction. And not just by little bit, I think it's, there are three X more moving towards authoritarian than democracy, which means that now 25% of the world's population lives in a backsliding democracy. And as you sort of look around the world and you realize, it's not that we're in this gray zone between

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democracy and authoritarianism, we're in the red zone between democracy and authoritarianism.

Aza Raskin: And this goes both ways, both, when you're sliding, towards authoritarianism, and when you're moving from authoritarianism to democracy. I think you gave the example of civil war coming just after the elections in Burundi in 1993. And so I just love a couple more examples, I think you talk about Yugoslavia and Rwanda, of countries in this middle zone and what it happens.

Barbara F Walte...: And Ukraine's another really good example. People now think about it differently because Russia has invaded, but Ukraine had a civil war that started in 2014, and it started at a time when it's sort of nascent democracy was declining and had moved into this middle zone. And that war was started by Russian speakers in Eastern Ukraine who were very pro-Russia, who had supported the previous president who was forced to resign after massive protest by Western Ukrainian speaking citizens, who wanted a president who was more pro-Europe.

Barbara F Walte...: And when the protestors were successful in forcing the resignation of President Yanukovich, they held elections and a pro-European, ethnic Ukrainian president was installed. And that triggered the Eastern citizens to demand succession, and the government refused to grant it to them. And they very quickly took up arms and began to fight.

Barbara F Walte...: The Russian speaking Eastern Ukrainians were working class. They were minors, but that industry was declining and their quality of life was declining. And they felt like there was this existential threat to them if they didn't have one of their own in power. And so when Yanukovich was forced to flee, and it looked like the Western Ukrainians were going to win, they decided, "We don't want to be part of," and that started the civil war. And of course, then Russia came in to help them. And now we have a situation where Russia just said, "Okay, we're going to take control of the whole country."

Barbara F Walte...: Another thing that we know from studying the over 200 civil wars that have happened since 1946, there's been a lot of them around the world. And if you look at the patterns that we see there, especially in the ones that break down, along ethnic lines, we call them ethnic civil wars, we know who starts these wars, and it's not who people think. People think it's going to be the poorest groups in society. The most downtrodden, the groups that are most discriminated against, or it's going to be the immigrants.

Barbara F Walte...: Groups that tend to start ethnic civil wars are the groups that had once been dominant. It's actually the ones that had once been powerful, politically and economically, and have either lost that power, or they see that they are losing power. And they're the ones that feel this existential threat to their culture, to

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their quality of life. And they're the ones who have the resources and the capacity and often are tolerated, so that they can mobilize.

Barbara F Walte...: A good example of this would be the Muslims in the Southern Philippines, in the Mindanao region of the Philippines. This was an area where Muslims had lived for hundreds of years. They had their own political structure, nobody bothered them. Even when the Americans came in and took control of the Philippines, they were kind of happy to let the Muslims continue to rule themselves. And then when the Philippines became independent, Manila and the north looked south, and they saw these very resource rich islands that were sparsely populated, and they began to encourage Catholics from the rest of the Philippines to migrate there.

Barbara F Walte...: And they gave them the best land, and they gave them the best jobs. But so many Catholics moved into Mindanao, that Muslims became a minority. And they didn't turn to violence immediately. They tried to work within the system, but their numbers were so small that they had no choice. And when it became clear that there was nothing that they could do peacefully to maintain their political control and maintain control of their land, that's when they shifted to violence.

Barbara F Walte...: So these are the types of groups, and what's motivating them is really interesting. It's this deep sense of resentment. It's this sense of loss of status, and this sense that this country belongs to them, it's rightfully theirs. They are justified in doing whatever it takes to maintain control. And it gets to the very heart of the identity of the country.

Barbara F Walte...: And if you think back to January 6th, what was so surprising about that was the impunity by which this group of individuals, they march down the middle of the mall. They were taking videos of each other as they were breaking into the Capital. And it was clearly their right to do this. They were being patriots. And that is just a classic sentiment that we are taking back our country, it is rightfully ours.

Tristan Harris: It's challenging, also, because the media environment creates different conditions, where a lot of those people actually just felt that the election was genuinely stolen from them. But you've listed a bunch of factors here, so you've listed anocracy, partial democracies. I'd love to actually flesh that out to just a little bit more, because I think it's important people to understand, what that middle zone means. And then factionalism, so when you get into a form of political polarization based mostly on ethnic, religious, or racial identities. You've talked about downgrading, when a dominant group is losing status. And then I just heard you say another factor, which I know from your book is when the downgraded group loses hope. When there's a loss of hope that there's something else that can be done through normal process.

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Tristan Harris: I just want to make sure we establish all these factors before then, probably, talking about how social media is making some of those factors worse. And then what do we want to do if we want to turn the knobs in a different direction, if those are in fact, the drivers of this process?

Barbara F Walte...: The organization that measures democracy for this anocracy variable is called the Center for Systemic Peace, and it's located in suburban Virginia. And every year it looks at every country around the world. The data go back to the late 1700s. And it looks at certain features of country's governments, and it assigns it a number. And for the anocracy variable, the number goes from negative 10 to positive 10, so it's this 21 point scale. And negative 10 are the most autocratic types of governments around the world, these are the North Koreas, the Saudi Arabias, the Bahraains. You did not want to be a negative 10.

Barbara F Walte...: The most democratic countries around the world are the positive 10s, this is Denmark and Switzerland and Canada, and it's where the United States was for many, many years. But in 2016, the Center for Systemic Peace downgraded the United States from a positive 10 to a positive eight. And that was the result of a number of things, but one of the big reasons was that international election observers, who were here during the 2016 election, they deemed our election free, but not entirely fair. And so that downgraded our democracy to a positive eight.

Barbara F Walte...: In 2019, the Center for Systemic Peace downgraded the United States again to a positive seven. And that was specifically because we had an executive branch, the president, who refused to respond to request by Congress for information, and who refused to respond to subpoenas. Now, that might not seem like a big idea, but the biggest check on executive power in our democracy is Congress. And if the president refuses to respond to Congress, that is undemocratic. And one of the things that's happened here in the United States, long before Trump, is that the executive branch has been getting more powerful than all the other branches, and is now dominating both the legislative and the judicial branch.

Barbara F Walte...: And then by the end of 2020, by the end of Trump's term, the Center for Systemic Peace downgraded us once again, this time to positive five. And you become an anocracy if you get a score of negative five to positive five, and by the end of Trump's term, we were considered anocracy. And the reason we were downgraded again was because we had a sitting president who refused to accept the results of an election, and actively tried to overturn those results.

Barbara F Walte...: And then if you think about ethnic factionalism, White Americans used to be equally likely to vote for the Democratic party as for the Republican party. We didn't have racial parties in this country. Even though we are a country that has been divided by race, we have not had racially based parties. And that began to change when Obama was elected, because the White working class, whose home had traditionally been with the Democrats, they gravitated towards the

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Republican party. So that, today, the Republican party is 90% White, in a country that is deeply multiethnic and multireligious.

Aza Raskin: Actually today, that's closer to 85% White.

Barbara F Walte...: So if the CIA we're looking at the United States, by the end of 2020, they would've said, "We're a partial democracy with one of our big parties, a classic ethnic faction."

Tristan Harris: You wrote in your book that since we went down to plus five, which is the lowest score that the US has had since 1800. And I think it's fascinating to learn that we had a progression towards a plus 10. I think we got two plus 10 in 1829 with the inauguration of Andrew Jackson. And only two times in history did a drop after that. In 1850, when the Southern Democrats used a take no prisoners' politics approach, years before the civil war, that dropped us to plus eight. And the second dip was after the civil rights movement in the 1960s. So just to give the listeners context about kind of where we are and what danger zone we might be in.

Tristan Harris: Where does the loss of hope play into this process?

Barbara F Walte...: Again, if you look historically at these other cases where you have partial democracies with ethnic factions, you could have these conditions for a very long period of time with no violence. And so then the question is, okay, what triggers violence? And I talk about this loss of hope, where people don't want civil war. They would prefer to hold onto power, just using conventional political means. And it's really only when that no longer works, that you begin to see them gravitate towards the more extreme individuals in their group.

Barbara F Walte...: Every society, every group has their own fringe of radicals. These are people who want more radical change. They're willing to use more radical measures to get the change that they want. They exist all the time in every society, but usually they don't get the support of more moderate citizens. And when the more moderate citizens start gravitating towards those radicals, it's when the moderates begin to lose hope.

Barbara F Walte...: When you have peaceful protests that fail year after year after year, and then are suddenly met with really harsh, brutal counter tactics, that will shift your average citizen towards the more radical extreme, that will radicalize people quite quickly.

Barbara F Walte...: But the second event that tends to create a loss of hope is a series of consecutive elections where that group loses. And democracies, especially majoritarian, winner take all democracies, are basically head counts. If you have the votes, you win those elections. And if you don't have a majority of the votes, you don't win those elections. And so those types of elections are also really

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information revealing. They tell you if the system works for you, given your numbers, or if it doesn't work for you.

Tristan Harris: You wrote in your book that all the democracies that experienced civil war between 1960 and 1995 had majoritarian presidential systems, and none were proportional representation systems. Do you want to say anything about that?

Barbara F Walte...: And that matters in the context of ethnic factions. I'm going to give you an example. At the end of the Soviet era, the former Yugoslavia suddenly was able to pick whatever type of political system it wanted to. And it tried to quickly democratize, and very quickly competitive elections were held throughout Yugoslavia. And you had the former communist leaders and Slobodan Milosevic had been a member of the communist party, had been in power in Serbia all through the Soviet era. And he understood that Yugoslavs knew that he was a member of the communist party, and Yugoslavs didn't like communists. And so he knew that if he had to face competitive elections, that Yugoslavs were not going to vote for him, they were going to vote for somebody else.

Barbara F Walte...: And he quickly realized that he did have an advantage. He was Serbian and the largest ethnic group in the former Yugoslavia were the Serbs. And so he realized that if he could convince them that they had to form their own Serb political party, they had to band together, and they absolutely had to vote for a Serb. And if they didn't do this, that the Croats were going to do that. And then the Croats were going to elect their own Croat leader into government. And that Croat leader was going to throw Serb out of their jobs, out of the military, and could potentially try to kill them the way that some Croats had killed Serbs during World War II.

Barbara F Walte...: And Milosevic was successful. He had control of state radio and state television, and he just projected this message, this narrative of Serbs need to stick to get other. And if you're a politician, this is brilliant, because if people are convinced that if they're a Serb, they have to vote for a Serb. There's nowhere else for them to go. They can't shift to the Croat party. And that means that somebody like Milosevic could do whatever he wants. He has enormous leeway to pursue the policies he wants to pursue, because he's not going to lose these voters. There's nowhere for them to go.

Aza Raskin: Two things that come up for me. One, just jumping back for a second to failed protests as an indicator for civil war. And I think you say in your book that there have been more protests in the last 10 years than in any their times, since the data was begun to be collected in 1900. I think 114 countries have had political protests, Chile, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Bolivia, India, Spain, Russia, Czech Republic, Algeria, Sudan, China. And then you said something, I found really interesting, that in the 1990s peaceful protest had a 65% success rate, that is the resulting in the overthrow of a government or gaining independence.

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Aza Raskin: But since 2010s, also interesting, sort of at the rise of social media, the success rate dropped at 34%, sort of creates these conditions of lack of hope. So that's sort of like one side. And the other thing that came up in my mind is that you use this term ethnic entrepreneur, and you're sort of talking about it here in Yugoslavia. And I want to go to this definition of ethnic entrepreneur, because I think it has a very strong analogy to how social media works and the incentives that it creates. But before we get there, I wanted to start with what is an ethnic entrepreneur? And what are the examples?

Barbara F Walte...: Ethnic entrepreneurs tend to be politicians, but they don't have to be politicians. They can be business leaders. They could be clergy. Ethnic entrepreneurs are really just individuals who play on people's identity in particular, they're ethnic religious to racial identity, for their own gain. But really where you see this working most clearly is with politicians who recognize, like Milosevic recognized it, that for whatever reason having to do with human nature, having to do with how our brains are wired, that when people feel threatened, when they live in times of change and uncertainty, that there is this tendency to want to band together with people who are like them.

Barbara F Walte...: And the narrative that they're saying is, "If you don't protect own tribe, then other tribes will come after you." And that then catapults these individuals into power. And it actually helps them stay there, again, for this reason that once ethnic parties have formed, there's nowhere for voters to go. And so they continue to back these individuals, even if they recognize that these individuals aren't really the best leaders, but at least they're their own leaders.

Aza Raskin: What I hear you saying is ethical entrepreneurs, they profit upon playing against our fears and getting us to see our fellow citizens as the gravest threat. And I think social media is sort of infrastructural ethnic entrepreneurship. It turns each and every one of us into an ethnic entrepreneur, because we are getting paid in likes and followers and attention for the worst thing we can say about the other side.

Tristan Harris: I think making this real for people, in October 2021, Tucker Carlson Originals published a video about January 6th, presupposing a war against the people, a purge of our patriots, and that the left is hunting the right and sticking them in Guantanamo Bay. So when you have the rhetoric that one side is actually threatening everyone on your side, and there's been many examples for people on the right who see overreaches by the left, calling everyone who's on the right, who voted for Donald Trump in the last election, homophobic, racist, misogynistic, white supremacist. And when they see this egregious overreach by the left, it makes it easier for someone like Tucker Carlson to say, "See, they're calling everyone who voted for Donald Trump a domestic terrorist."

Tristan Harris: And when they can point to a simple example, like the fact that I don't know if it's the FBI or I forgot which organization has a domestic terrorism unit that

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they've been staffing up, and that mostly they're worried about right wing extremists. Tucker Carlson can spin that and say, "That means that they're going after all of us on the right." And this is the kind of ways that the holographic sort of prism of all these different worldviews colliding leads to more and more escalation. So now that we've established the factors of super factionalism, ethnic entrepreneurship, anocracy, how is social media an accelerant to these forces?

Barbara F Walte...: I should start by saying, we have hunches, but we don't yet have the hard evidence that this is in fact happening. The reason we don't have hard evidence that shows a causal link, for example, between the rise of social media or Facebook usage, and the decline of liberal democracy or the rise of ethnic nationalism is because scholars don't have access to the data which companies like Facebook have been jealously guarding. In the absence of those data, we can't prove that this is in fact true. It's why I found Frances Haugen, the Facebook whistleblower, her testimony was so, so powerful, because in the tens of thousands of pages of Facebook material that she turned over, it was clear that Facebook has been analyzing its own data. And it actually knows that it is having these effects, and it simply has not been willing to release the data.

Barbara F Walte...: But what we have are hunches, but these are really important and powerful hunches. And they're based on trends that we're seeing. So the number of democracies around the world had been increasing for over a 100 years until 2010. So it had become this pattern that everybody thought would continue. The world every year was becoming more democratic. The 1930s, and '40s, there was some downturns, but generally the trend was up. The expectation, even at the turn of the last century, was that all we had to do was wait, and eventually the whole world would become liberal democracies.

Barbara F Walte...: And then that halted in 2010. Not only have we seen declines in the number of democracies around the world every year since then, but we have seen something that we've never seen before, which is that our most liberal democracies, the democracies that were considered sacrosanct, they have been declining as well. And I gave you the example, the United States, but the same thing, to a lesser degree, has been happening in the UK, in Sweden, in countries that we just never thought would see this.

Barbara F Walte...: And there's no good explanation for this. Why is this happening now, when it has never happened in these countries? Why is it not only happening now, but it's happening across all of these countries?

Barbara F Walte...: The second big trend we're seeing is the rise of ethnic nationalism. Ethnicity and identity is not only becoming much more important across countries, but societies are dividing more stringently along that line, and you're seeing more hate crimes. They're based on a sense of the dominant group in these countries protecting their privilege, whether that's Hindus in India, who represent the vast

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majority of Indians, they feel threatened and they're forming far right parties around it, or in Brazil or in the Philippines, or here in the United States. So you're seeing the rise of not only hate crimes, but also these ethnically based far right party. So you're seeing this around the world, and it's all happening around the same time, starting 2006, escalating in 2010.

Barbara F Walte...: And then one of the really interesting things that I found is every region in the world was experiencing economic decline prior to 2019, except Africa. Africa continued to increase its number of democracies. It was the only region that was bucking the trend until 2019.

Barbara F Walte...: What was different about Africa? Well, there were lots of things that were different, but it was the region that was the last to get the internet. Internet penetration in Africa was extremely low. And then, of course, eventually, the internet and social media came to Africa as well. And that's when you started also to see the decline of democracy in that region.

Barbara F Walte...: So social scientists, we're seeing all of these patterns and trends that we've never seen before, it's not just, "Oh, these are interesting trends," that are blowing our mind. How is it possible that liberal democracy is declining? How is it possible that we're seeing the rise of ethnically based parties everywhere? And really the big transformation that happened at the time was the rise of not only social media, but that social media became one of the main sources of information for citizens around the world.

Aza Raskin: So we're going to take quick interlude here. Tristan and I are going to talk about some of what we do now, and then we'll get back to the interview.

Tristan Harris: So what do we know about the effect of social media on civil conflict? Well, listeners just have to go back to our episodes with Frances Haugen, the Facebook whistleblower, Maria Ressa and the Philippines, or Fadi Quran, from of Avaaz, talking about social media's effect in Brazil and the kind of conflict there.

Tristan Harris: We have seen overwhelming evidence of the way that fundamentally, when Facebook changes the algorithm, which they did in 2018 to switch to a new metric called meaningful social interactions, that that kind of backfired in favoring negative content and extreme content. Even in Facebook's own research that Frances Haugen disclosed, she talks about how there were publishers who used to publish a 50/50 split of positive and negative content, to a 80/20 split of negative content to positive content, because the algorithm rewarded it.

Tristan Harris: And what that shows is that when you change the algorithm, you change the incentives for all of the publishers. It's like a black hole that starts to steer the behavior of spacetime of all of these other actors who are outside the black hole, because the only way they can get attention is by appealing to that

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negative algorithm. And when you run that thing over and over and over again, for 10 years, you start to see how this has impacted society.

Aza Raskin: A legitimate thought here is to say, okay, so we are making online discourse more acidic, more hate forward, but maybe that doesn't have an impact in the real world. And so, also in 2018, there was a really incredible study done in Germany. It was a Germany wide study that showed how social media acts as a propagation mechanism between online hate and real life violence.

Aza Raskin: So what they did was they studied over a two year period, every single act of violence against refugees. And the thing that they found was that towns where Facebook use was higher than average, it reliably created more attacks on refugees. In fact, to get really specific, wherever per person Facebook use rose to one standard deviation above the national average, attacks on refugees increased by about 50%. You dose a population with one standard deviation, more looking at Facebook, and it programmatically across Germany creates 50% more attacks on refugees. The study was particularly interesting, because they were actually able to get to causality, not just correlation.

Aza Raskin: And the effect appears to be universal, Facebook reliably increased attacks, in the same way, across cities with different demographics, with different support for far right politics or newspaper sales or number of refugees or history of hate crime or number of protests. And I think this is the point that Barbara was making that social media does the same thing, no matter which country, culture, or county you're in.

Tristan Harris: And then when you look at just those fundamental incentives, you get paid this many units of currency when you say something bad about your fellow countrymen, and you get paid this many units of currency when you say something good about your fellow countrymen, it doesn't take rocket science to understand where that's going to go in the long term.

Tristan Harris: And so, one of the fundamental challenges here is we're using the wrong instrument. Instead of at studies, we have to look at what are the of core generator functions. And the reason for that is that Facebook is going to tweak the algorithm again next year. And when they do that, they can say, "Oh, that study you did last year, well, that's no longer true, because we changed the algorithm."

Tristan Harris: And by the time you can study the effect of that next study, you won't have enough data. And so by the time it has broken the social contract, we might have 10 studies that showed us exactly how. While we could have actually intervened in the first place, by just recognizing at the core generator function level.

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Aza Raskin: We also want to note some positive trends. For instance, in 2021, the Center for Systemic Peace actually raised the US score back to plus eight. So we're not currently considered an anocracy.

Tristan Harris: And it's worth noting that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has stirred and revitalized some of our beliefs in democracy, and brought us back together to the democratic table to say, "We don't want this form of autocratic governance." And so is there a way that this can continue to be leveraged, to create more unity among the techno democracies and help us kind of revitalize what this means that we're after?

Tristan Harris: One of the things that stuck out to me in your book is how, when one faction has control and it's perceived to not care about the other factions, about the other people in the country, and how that creates this loss of hope, because you feel like this group that's in power just doesn't care about you anymore.

Tristan Harris: So with all that said, if we wanted to turn this around, and there's a lot of forces that are driving this, social media's not the only one by far, you've just outlined so many of them for listeners. I really struggle with this, right? I mean-

Barbara F Walte...: Yeah.

Tristan Harris: ... some of this feels so... It's hard to imagine things going in a different direction as it keeps going this way. I'm curious to recall the example of South Africa and thinking, how would it go a different way? If I actually use my own sort of thinking here, I feel like the emergence of a new foreign external threat is the typical way that you bind people together in the face of that.

Tristan Harris: It's interesting watching this moment with Russia, invading Ukraine, how there is a kind of a temporary drop of some of the domestic interethnic, interpolitical party frustrations, which I think is a good thing. So I'm just curious, when you think about other factors that could drive this a different direction, I mean, let's brainstorm and spitball some things here.

Barbara F Walte...: I actually think probably the easiest thing to do, although you might disagree and say, "This is actually not very easy to do," but regulate social media. I think that would make it harder for people like Putin, who we know has been waging a disinformation campaign here and in all liberal democracies, to try to undercut and weaken the democracies. We know that it's exacerbating societal divisions and pushing people to the extremes. That would just tamp things down quite quickly. That's your area of expertise, and thank God that you guys are talking about this, and educating the rest of us on how exactly you do this.

Barbara F Walte...: But then the second way to do it is really to strengthen our democracy. Full liberal democracies don't experience civil wars. And this is what we haven't talked about yet, which is the power of peaceful protests. There's a woman at

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the Kennedy School, her name's Erica Chenoweth, and she spent her career studying, not only how effective peaceful protests and peaceful resistance can be, but getting into the nitty gritty of how exactly you do that most effectively.

Barbara F Walte...: And what she's found is that even though protests have been less successful recently, they're still surprisingly effective. That when people get out in the streets in the hundreds of thousands and they stay out in the street and they make their voices heard, it's hard for politicians to ignore them. Think about the authoritarian leaders in North African and the Middle East during the Arab Spring, Mubarak had been in power for decades. He didn't have to answer to Egyptians. And yet he was not able to stay in power, once Egyptians started going out into the street. If Americans get out in the street and they begin to demand reform, and they stay out in the street, I think it's really hard for politicians to continue with business as usual.

Tristan Harris: Would love for you to talk about maybe South Africa or just some of the ways that this goes the other direction. Because the premise of this conversation is not to heighten the chance this for things to go the way we don't want, but to illuminate what allows us to hit the escape Hatch into a different future.

Barbara F Walte...: South Africa is the clearest example, because it was so close to civil war. None of the experts who study civil war really thought it was going to avoid it. It was one of those cases where we thought, okay, here's a country where for sure there's going to be violence. You have the vast majority of the population is Black. You have this White minority regime that is increasingly repressive, increasingly violent towards the Black majority, that refuses to make any concessions, even the face of rising protests. And Black South Africans had protested for decades, peacefully protested. They'd had strikes and they'd used a whole series of the tools of peaceful resistance and nothing worked.

Barbara F Walte...: And not only that, the White apartheid regime was going in the other direction. Many of your listeners will remember the Soweto riots and that horrible day when police went in and they just started shooting school children, who were protesting in the street. And I think what was so shocking about that was that there were video cameras, there are television cameras, there were journalists there taking pictures and they didn't care. There was this sense of such impunity. They could kill children on television, and there were going to be no repercussions.

Barbara F Walte...: And then it shifted, and it shifted quite quickly. And so you think, well, why this shift? And of course it wasn't because Whites in South Africa suddenly got a conscience. That was absolutely not the case. I think if they had been able to continue to cement minority rule, they would've absolutely done that. But what changed, in part, there were other things that happened, but a big thing that changed was that the White business community, which had always supported

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apartheid, they had benefited from apartheid, the profits of their companies were increasingly being hurt by economic sanctions.

Barbara F Walte...: And the economic sanctions that took so long to institute against South Africa ended up being really, really effective, and they worked. And the White business community eventually had to decide that they could have profits, or they could have apartheid, but they could not have both. And they very quickly chose profits. And they told the apartheid regime that they were not going to continue to support it. And as soon as that happened, this minority regime understood that the game was over, and they negotiated. And they ensured that they were still able to maintain dominance in business, so that White businesses were not going to be nationalized for example. So they protected their profits, but political control was transferred to the Black majority.

Aza Raskin: It reminds me of Amanda Gorman's poem lines, "somehow we've weathered and witnessed a nation that isn't broken, but simply unfinished." Barbara Walter, thank you so much for coming on Your Undefined Attention.

Barbara F Walte...: Thank you both for inviting me. It's really my pleasure to be here.

Aza Raskin: Barbara F. Walter is a leading expert on international security, with an emphasis on civil wars. She's the Rohr Professor of International Affairs at the School of Global Policy and Strategy at the University of California, San Diego, and a permanent member of the council on foreign relations. Her most recent book is the subject of our conversation, *How Civil Wars Start: And How to Stop Them*.

Aza Raskin: Your undivided attention is produced by the Center for Humane Technology, a nonprofit organization, working to catalyze a humane future. Our executive producer is Stephanie Lepp, and our senior producer is Julia Scott. Mixing on this episode by Jeff Sudakin. 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.

Aza Raskin: You can find show notes, transcript, and much more at humanetech.com. And a very special thanks to our generous lead supporters, including the Omidyar network, Craig Newmark Philanthropies, and the EVOLVE Foundation, among many others. And if you made it all the way here, let me give just one more thank you to you for giving us your undivided attention.