

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast
Episode 56: [Fighting With Mirages of Each Other with Adam Mastroianni](#)

Tristan Harris: Have you ever lost a friend to misperception? Have you lost a friend or family member to the idea that your views had just gotten so different, that it was time to end the relationship? Perhaps even by unfriending each other on Facebook? But perhaps the idea that our views are so different is not so accurate. Perhaps we're losing each other based on warped visions of each other. I'm Tristan Harris.

Aza Raskin: I'm Aza Raskin.

Tristan Harris: This is Your Undivided Attention, the podcast from the Center for Humane Technology. Today on the show, we're talking with Adam Mastroianni, a post-doctoral research scholar at Columbia Business School, who studies how we perceive and misperceive our social world. Together with Adam, we're going to explore how accurate and inaccurate our views of each other actually are. As you listen to the conversation, maybe keep in mind that relationship that you might have lost to misperception, and maybe that you might be able to revive as a result of what you hear.

Aza Raskin: Adam, I am so excited to have you on Your Undivided Attention. I think your work, it's both incredibly critical at some of the most critical problems, and also some of the most hopeful, because it shows that, as bad as the world seems, perhaps it's not as bad as it appears in the sense that we aren't accurately seeing other people. You have this incredible line. You say, "People change when they think others are changing, but people misperceive others' changes. These misperceptions may bedevil people's efforts to understand and change their social worlds, distort the democratic process, and turn imaginary trends into real ones."

When I hear that, I'm like, it's as if, when we look at it, the world we're actually inside of a virtual reality headset and I am not seeing what other people really believe. I'm seeing a virtual world and they become not just misperceptions, but false reality. This would be fine if we were talking about misperceptions of inconsequential things, but that's not what we're talking about.

You know, talk about it's on abortion and immigration and gun control and climate change, religion and race and gender. I would love to start with the basics of your work, so people can get an understanding where you're coming from. Talk to us about the state of misperceptions, of false realities. What are the really important ones? The really surprising ones? What got you started getting into this work?

Adam Mastroianni...: Yeah. First of all, thanks for having me. I'm really excited to talk to you all. There's a lot of work out there on, "Do people know the state of the world around them? Do they know what other people think?" Going back 30 years, there was some great work on, "Do college students know how comfortable other college students are with drinking?" The answer is no, because when you

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast
Episode 56: [Fighting With Mirages of Each Other with Adam Mastroianni](#)

go to a party, seems like everybody there is pretty comfortable, because they're all holding red solo cups and they seem to be having a nice time.

What you don't get to do is peek into their brains and see the little voice inside them going, "I don't really want to be here. This isn't very fun. I wish I'd rather be back of my door room, playing Dungeons and Dragons." There's a lot of that work out there and my work puts a spin on it, which is to ask, not just do people know what the world is like today, but do they know how it got to be this way?

I think that's an important thing to think about, because I think we understand the world in stories. That we are really good at encoding information into stories, we're good at using them as essentially JPEGs for our minds. They compress a lot of information, they're easy to transmit, where it's easy to blow them back up and understand all the context. If you get the stories wrong, you get a lot of things wrong. One of the things that you get wrong is your assessment of how to feel about the world today.

When we say that things are good or bad, what we're really saying is that they're better or worse than some other things, some relevant comparison. Often when we're talking about the world, the relevant comparison is the past. Things are good today. If they're better, things are bad today, if they're worse.

Understanding how things compare to the past is a really important ingredient in how we feel about the world today. The other thing that those misperceptions can do is change what you think is important and what you think is possible. If, for instance, everybody you know is quitting smoking, you might start to think like, "Oh, it's important to quit smoking. This is something that people are spending time doing and it's possible, because it shows you that change is possible and that people care enough to do it."

Some of the work that I've done is looking at people's misperceptions in change over time in two domains, mainly. One is people's perceptions of public opinion change over time. How people feel about racism and gender and climate change, gun control, abortion, big ticket items like that. Then another part of my work is about how people think that people have changed over time, specifically how they've changed in terms of how kind, honest, nice, and good they are, how moral they are. To highlight, I think some of the important findings in that moral decline work, we find that people think that people are less kind, honest, nice and good than they used to be. Even than just a few years ago, they think it's been happening their whole lives.

We have all this archival data going back as far as 1949 and even back then people thought the same thing and that rate hasn't changed over time. This is true all over the world in every country that's ever been surveyed. If you ask people, "Is moral decline a problem into your country?" A majority of people will

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast
Episode 56: [Fighting With Mirages of Each Other with Adam Mastroianni](#)

say yes. In the second part of the work, we go looking for any evidence that this is possibly the case.

There are lots of surveys that have been done for decades asking people about their experiences in their social worlds. Did people treat you with respect all day yesterday? Did you give up your seat on a bus for a stranger within the past month? What we see over and over again on those studies is that those things don't change. It seems like people have this story that people just get worse and worse. Every generation is worse than the last, individuals get worse over time. We can't find any evidence for it. In the third part, we have some explanations for why people might think this, but I can get into that a little later.

Aza Raskin: Just to jump in with a question, because one of the other findings from, I think your most recent paper, is that there is a tendency for people to think the past was more conservative than it was and that the present is more progressive or liberal than it is. I'd love for you to talk about that, but also talk about some of these specific misperceptions on the consequential things like immigration, et cetera.

Adam Mastroianni...: Yeah. With my collaborator, Jason Dana, we found 51 public opinion items that had been measured multiple times over the decades. We just took these questions and we showed them to people and we asked them, "Here's the most recent time point for which we have data. How do you think people answered the question then?" We find is people think that there's been more change in the liberal direction than there really has been. That's mainly driven by people thinking that the past was more conservative than it actually was.

To give you some examples, there's a question from the general social survey, "Would you vote for a black person for president if your party nominated them and they were qualified for the job?" That was first asked in 1978. We ask people, "What percent of Americans do you think said yes to that question? They would vote for a black person for president, if their party nominated them and they were qualified for the job?" People thought that only about 25% of Americans said yes to that question in '78. They thought that increased to about 75% in 2010.

In reality, those numbers are like 85 and 95%. People are right that there was an increase over the past 40 years, but they were wrong about the size of that increase. Now obviously there could be a difference between what people say that they would do and what people would actually do. There are a few cases where people underestimate the amount of change that's occurred. We asked three questions about people being comfortable with a close relative marrying someone who is black, Asian, or Hispanic. These were originally measured in 1990. I think these results are pretty surprising. The actual numbers are around 50% of people said they would be uncomfortable with a close family member marrying someone who is black, Asian, or Hispanic in 1990. That falls to less

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast
Episode 56: [Fighting With Mirages of Each Other with Adam Mastroianni](#)

than 10% today. But people think that it's still above 25%. That's an example of a case where people don't understand how much things have changed. But in general, the pattern that we find is that people think we came from this past that was really conservative where people said things like, "I don't like my minorities, women are dumb. Guns are great and immigration is bad." This cartoon version of a conservative past, and that we've become kind of this cartoon version of a liberal future where everything's great and guns are bad. Both of those stories are wrong. The story of how we came from one to the other is also wrong.

Tristan Harris: It's never been easier to be out of touch with the actual ground truth of an issue because it's not something that an individual embodied human agent can get their mind around. We need sampling methods. We interviewed Dan Vallone on this podcast from the organization More in Common. He found in their work that the more time people used social media, the less in touch with what people actually believed about every issue, specifically the measurement between one political tribe estimating the beliefs of another political tribe.

Can Republicans estimate the beliefs of Democrats accurately? If you ask Republicans, what percentage Democrats or LGBTQ, they estimate more than a third of Democrats are LGBTQ and only 6% are. Anyway, we wanted to actually go deeper into this notion of perception gaps, because so much of the social media conversation is kind of misinformation, fake information. What's really like, are we even calibrating our views of the world well? As you sort of pointed out, it's not like we've been excellent at this ever really, but in an ideal world with 21st century technology with the right philosophy, I think we can all agree that the more we would use technology we'd love it to be the case that the better our assessments would be. So we'd have an Adam Mastroianni in our pocket every time we use social media, as it were.

Adam Mastroianni...: Yeah. I'd like to be split into 330 million versions and live in a lot of pockets and fight off a lot of pocket lint. But I think your question points to the difficulty of figuring out what is it that most people think. This is a really interesting and difficult problem that the human mind has to solve. I think generally the way that we try to solve it is we look at what people do. Those are the things that we value.

If we import our person perception faculties into our world perception problem, we might say, "Okay, the state of the world generally reflects the will of the people in it. The way that it is probably the way a majority of people want it to be." But we all know there are many cases in which we actually, most of us don't want the world to be this way. Why is that the case?

I think a good example of this is when you're sitting in traffic. I think we all get really frustrated, because we're like, "I want to go fast. Everybody else wants to go slow. As a result, I must suffer." But in fact, nobody around you wants to go

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast
Episode 56: [Fighting With Mirages of Each Other with Adam Mastroianni](#)

slow. Everybody would like to go fast, but something has happened that prevents us all from going fast. That might be a crash or one person at the front of the line going really slow. But we often find ourselves in this situation where we all end up doing a thing that nobody actually wanted. I think that that's kind of the fundamental problem of human civilization, is falling into these social traps.

Aza Raskin:

The thing that's coming up for me, is there's this trap in believing that behavior is revealed preferences, which is what I think you're pointing at. We see that trap show up time and time again in Silicon Valley where there's a conflation of, "If somebody clicked it, it must really be the thing they wanted to see. That's the thing they really wanted to spend their time doing." The analogy we'll often give, back to the car analogy, is imagine there was a little AI watching you as you drive. It sees you turn your head to look at the car crash and makes the assumption that obviously that's your revealed preference. You want car crashes. I'm going to restructure the world around you, so you get to see and experience more car crashes. Aren't you grateful human?

Then of course, nobody actually wants the car crash. There's a distinction between that which we want and that which we can't help but look at. I sort of think that's part of what you're describing here. I want to continue the path for the listener, how misperceptions lead to policies that in fact, most people don't want.

Adam Mastroianni...:

In a third series of studies in this most recent paper, we posed people a series of hypotheticals. We said, "What if public opinion had changed in this way or the opposite way? What if support for banning assault weapons had gone from a minority of Americans to a majority of Americans? How justifiable would it be for Congress to ban assault weapons?" People respond to this, I think in ways that are very sensible. They go, "Oh, well, if the majority has shifted in favor of doing it, it's justifiable. If it's shifted away from doing it, it's not justifiable." The wrinkle there, being that people don't know actually which way that this has shifted. This is one that I personally think is unfortunate. I would love to live in a world where people just can't carry around devices that can kill other people at will.

A lot of Americans disagree with me on that. Interestingly, you might think that all of these mass shootings and school shootings would have caused people to become more in favor of gun control, but the opposite has happened. In our studies, we find that people think that people have become more in favor of gun control. In fact, the opposite has happened in the past few decades. These misperceptions can matter, even when we're currently at a stalemate.

Attitudes toward the death penalty are actually pretty close to 50/50. We posed the question to people, "What if it had risen to 50/50, or what if it had fallen to 50%?" We're still at a stale mate. There is no majority here. People said it's more

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast
Episode 56: [Fighting With Mirages of Each Other with Adam Mastroianni](#)

justifiable to ban the death penalty, when support for doing so has risen to 50%, than when it's fallen to 50%.

If you're looking out on the world and you have these misperceptions in your mind, you might think that things are more justifiable or not justifiable than you would think if you knew the real story. That's one reason why I think they're important. That we have these stories in our head that make us think one way about what's reasonable and what's possible, but the stories are wrong.

Aza Raskin:

I think it's really interesting just to double underline. Now, I think we're really getting into this world of, we have put on a set of virtual reality glasses. We're looking out at the world to understand what other people think, so we know what we think is acceptable and we're just getting the wrong image. We're moving off in an imaginary direction. The next natural question is like, "Well, what is the nature of this bias or this warp? Is it just motivated reasoning? I believe what I want to believe because confirmation bias." What's the directionality here?

Adam Mastroianni...:

Yeah. I like the example of virtual reality goggles. The interesting thing is that all humans are born with a pair of virtual reality goggles, called their eyeballs. There is a world out there, we only get a version of it that comes in through our eyes, and our ears, and our fingers, and our tongues. It is a warped image of what's out there. We each have our own warped image in our heads.

If you've ever had a quarrel with your partner, you've felt that this insane feeling of why don't you see the world how I see it, because I just see the world as it is. Psychologists would call this naive realism, this idea that we see the world as it is. If other people disagree, it's because they're wearing virtual reality goggles. If they just took them off, they would see the world like we see it, which is the way it actually is.

Tristan Harris:

One of the things for me and how I orient in this conversation, is I think a lot of people have lost family members or friends that they used to be able to talk to, and feel like they can no longer talk to them or even in many cases, their friendship has ended. Like they've, that's been formalized by literally unfriending them on Facebook, because of the fact that these misperceptions have actually gone so rampant. The cost of this move towards a world where if we're just getting real, there's a concern about escalating towards civil war levels of polarization.

The premise of this conversation is that a real thing? We've talked about it in the past, in this podcast as a kind of optical illusion. It's like I'm looking through a fun house mirror. When I look out at the other tribes out there in the world, I see the most egregious acts that they've ever done, because it's the most extreme steps, the most engaging content, the most conflict, the most drama, the most salacious headline.

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast
Episode 56: [Fighting With Mirages of Each Other with Adam Mastroianni](#)

I see the worst possible representation of what the other side does. Then when I look at my side, I look behind and I see the good examples. I see, let's say I'm on the left. Then I look behind me and I see, let's take a polarizing topic... I mean, critical race theory. I see people who are saying, "Look, this history of how people were marginalized in this country has just not been appropriately or deeply enough integrated into the way that we are showing up as a country. We have some healing to do, and that hasn't fully happened yet. We need to educate ourselves better as a country about how to do that."

Let's call that the version of what a well intentioned, good faith person holding that view might be. But when the other side looks in the social media funhouse mirror at people looking at critical race theory, they don't see those good faith people. They see the people that are segregating white kids and black kids, and then redoing segregation and actually doing reverse racism against white people. They see the most extreme thing.

For me, the reason this conversation brought out stuff that's so interesting is more so than fake news or fake information, if we are not able to actually understand what each other believe and that result of that gap is that we're like going to take up arms and go into civil war. That's kind of the implications for me when I just root into, what am I feeling? Where do I get most activated? What am I really worried about?

I think the premise of this conversation is that if we can break down the geometry of the funhouse mirror, it's like we shine a little laser and we see it bounce back and forth a few times. We start to see there's actually a more optimistic picture here. Another world is possible, because this is not in fact the reality that we're in.

Adam Mastroianni...: One area of misperception that I find really fascinating is about climate change and specifically belief in climate change and worry about climate change. We have surveys going back to 1990, asking people, are you worried about global warming? Our most recent data was in 2019. People think that only about 25% of Americans were worried about climate change in 1990. Now a majority, nearly 75% is worried about it today.

In fact, there's no difference on this survey between 1990 and 2019. It's always been a majority of Americans who said that they were at least moderately worried about it. I think that misperception is important, because if you are a person worried about climate change, you might think the biggest barrier between us and taking action on climate change is convincing people to be worried about it.

That's what I need to do. I need to convince people it's happening and that it's a problem, not realizing that is where most Americans are already. What is the barrier? Well, maybe it's not their top priority. Maybe we disagree about what

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast
Episode 56: [Fighting With Mirages of Each Other with Adam Mastroianni](#)

the right thing to do is, or there might be a million other things, but if you don't realize this misperception, you might go on an awareness raising campaign that didn't need to happen. In fact, I think there's been a lot of attempts at awareness raising campaigns between 1990 and 2019 and at least from this survey question, there's not a lot of evidence that's done much of anything. Whatever action we need to take on climate change, it might be different from trying to move people on being worried about it.

Aza Raskin:

Hey, everyone, I'd like to take a moment to highlight a stark example of Americans' misperceptions on climate, but it's a misperception, not in the way you might think. Just a few weeks ago, a study published in Nature Communications showed that Americans are living in what the researchers called a false social reality. What's that? Americans perceive that their fellow countrymen and women oppose climate policies at a rate of two to one. But in fact, the reverse is true.

Those who support climate mitigation and action outnumber their opponents by two to one. That's a tremendous perception gap, really a reality gap that flips a super majority into a minority. This false reality is being lived by Americans in every state and every assessed demographic. Quoting from the study, "80 to 90% of Americans underestimate the prevalence of support for major climate change mitigation policies. Americans estimate the prevalence to be around 37 to 43% on average."

But in reality, the number is up to 80%. That's almost a 40% swing, and this is a critically important misperception, because it is a major obstacle to collective action on climate change. If you don't think your fellow country men and women are concerned, then you are not going to believe that change is possible.

Imagine if our technology was tuned for accurate listening, for correcting these kinds of perception gaps and popping these false social realities. Well, perception gaps, that's an objective measure, which lets us sidestep, perhaps the quagmire of fact checking and moderation and who's to decide questions. If we all knew that the super majority actually believes climate action is necessary, then imagine how much faster action would actually happen.

If part of our disagreements are actually a kind of trick of a light, that's a really powerful message of hope. It's less about awareness raising campaigns. It's about raising awareness of the awareness that's already there.

Adam, if you could wave a wand or we collectively waved a wand and aligned perceptions with reality. Suddenly all of these graphs actually matched up. What would the consequences be?

Adam Mastroianni...:

Yeah. What would happen if everyone perceived their social worlds accurately? Well I can tell you first, I don't think one side of the political spectrum would win

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast
Episode 56: [Fighting With Mirages of Each Other with Adam Mastroianni](#)

out. I think what would at least happen, is people would have a better sense of what things are possible. I think our governance would become more representative, that it would become less tenable to propose and push for legislation that clearly people are turning against or have never been for in the first place.

I think people deserve to have accurate information about their social worlds. I think in this case, I don't feel a lot of qualms about waving that wand. In an interpersonal case, I might. I don't think it's necessarily good to be able to read the thoughts of everybody around you, but to read the thoughts in general of people around you, I think is at least an experiment worth running. If you have that wand around, I'd love to start waving it.

Aza Raskin: It's almost like a computational or society wide non-violent communication, and saying at the very least we should be able to accurately represent what each other thinks, because if we can't do that, then we are just always going to be fighting with mirages. When you're fighting with mirages, you're not going to get anywhere. In fact, you're going to try to throw a punch and you're going to punch yourself in your face.

Adam Mastroianni...: There's some other work here, actually that I've done that's relevant. That is a little bit like that. This is work that isn't published yet, but in a series of studies, we had people do what's called the ideological Turing test. Which, I tried to pretend to be my ideological opponent and then my ideological opponents try to see whether they can figure out that I'm faking or not.

We got a bunch of Democrats or Republicans. We randomly assigned them to write statements that are either pro Democrat or pro Republican. Some people are going undercover and some people are just talking about their true beliefs. We told them, we'll pay you extra money if people believe that you are what you claim to be. We told them the whole setup. We were like, some of these people are faking. Some are telling the truth. See if you can figure out who is who.

People couldn't. The writers did a great job. When Democrats tried to be, tried to be Republicans, they nailed it. When Republicans tried to be Democrats, they nailed it. When readers, both Democrats and Republicans, tried to figure out who was faking and who was telling the truth, they were at chance. They could have just flipped a coin and done as well.

This I think is a different take on misperceptions that if we ask people, "What do you think an average Republican or an average Democrat responded to this?" That people will get that wrong by a pretty large margin. One of my takeaways from that, is people actually do encounter a lot of information about the other side. There may be some of these disagreements that really are substantive. We can't cure ourselves of misperceptions as a way out of it.

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast
Episode 56: [Fighting With Mirages of Each Other with Adam Mastroianni](#)

Now I still think those gaps exist and would be better off if they didn't. But some people believe some things that are just incompatible with what the other people believe. We have to find some way of running a country where both of those people get represented.

Tristan Harris: Yeah. It's really interesting to hear about the ideological Turing test. Basically being able to write down the beliefs that you think the other side holds, because in my kind of thinking on how social media warps these perceptions are... Are you familiar with the term pre/trans fallacy?

Adam Mastroianni...: No.

Tristan Harris: The idea that there are different ways someone could hold a belief that are distinct from one another, but actually sound identical to someone who doesn't know which one. For example, let's take a famous one per COVID. An anti-vax person, a person who's against the vaccine. Okay. Imagine there's like a development of someone's worldview. Starting off, if you have no information and you think that Bill Gates is micro-chipping everybody, and the vaccine is just a secret attempt to chip everybody or something like that. That's called the crazy or naive view.

Then we have the savvy person, the person who knows that that's actually just not true. Then there's this other group of people who are against the vaccine, but their reasons are that we actually don't have long-term safety data on this vaccine. Until we have that safety data, we should probably look at treatments that actually we have lots of safety data on and anything that's worked from that existing set of treatments, we should do that.

Someone who's speaking from that perspective that they would like to not vaccinate themselves. If they just utter the sentence, I don't want to be vaccinated. They sound identical to a Bill Gates microchip person, who says, "I don't want to be vaccinated." The pre/trans fallacy is confusing the naive person for the, "Wiser transcendent perspective." I think that in general, this is why I was intrigued by your bringing up this ability to ideologically predict and write down accurately, someone else's beliefs in a way that they will agree with them.

Because what I see happening in the social media landscape, is when the anti-vax people who are just saying, "Hey, look, we don't have safety data on this vaccine yet. When you accuse me of being a naive anti-vaxer, it actually makes me more angry and more polarized." The way that we're perceiving each other, we have pre/trans fallacies everywhere on every topic. With immigration, you have the naive xenophobic, "We don't want those immigrants here," kind of people. Then you have the, "More savvy people," who are like, "No, no that's wrong. We need to be inclusive. We need to make sure we're welcoming people in the country."

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast
Episode 56: [Fighting With Mirages of Each Other with Adam Mastroianni](#)

But if you have a culture in a company and you just open the floodgates to anybody coming in, it only takes a few people who don't have that same culture for maybe something to get disrupted. We have to be conscious about how much immigration to do and so on and so forth. But someone who's having that kind of nuanced, let's not call it anti-immigration, but a kind of a nuanced immigration perspective, is going to be called xenophobic and racist and so on and so forth.

In general, I'm both surprised to hear about that finding that we can hear people's views and second is that I see this secondary dynamic occurring everywhere with social media. When people are accused of having a worldview that they don't actually have, because what they're saying sounds identical to someone who is racist or something like that, it actually makes people way more angry and to pick up, not an arm, but let's call it the potential energy for violence, if not the kinetic energy for violence.

Adam Mastroianni...: Yeah. I think what that points to, is what is a fair rubric for testing whether people understand each other or not? There are so many ways that you could ask people about the world around them, about other people in that world. That is one solution I think that the ideological Turing test provides is like, "Look, you can say whatever you want and then we're going to show it to the other side. They're going to say that's me or not."

Something interesting about that by the way, is that we also showed statements from the other side to each side. Republicans now have to pick apart real and fake Democrats and Democrats have to pick apart real and fake Republicans. This is kind of inverting the test and people do just as well. It wasn't like people had some kind of additional insight into their own side.

It really seemed like people knew just as much about their own side as they did about the other side, which is to say not enough to pick out the true ones from the fake ones, or you could say they knew enough to be convincingly fake. I don't know how we implement that on Twitter for example, but I think it's a good bar to clear, to say, "Before I accuse you of anything, I'm going to write out what I think it is that you believe, and we don't get to move forward until you agree that that's what that is."

I think by the time we get to something that we can both agree on, a lot of things have gone away. What remains are the things that we maybe knew from the first place. You think life starts at conception. I don't. It's unclear what to do after that.

Aza Raskin: At a very personal level, there was a relationship that I was in that ended and you know how there are those 36 questions you ask to fall in love? We ended up doing sort of an inverse. It was actually 18, but 18 questions you'd ask to say

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast
Episode 56: [Fighting With Mirages of Each Other with Adam Mastroianni](#)

goodbye, but really the core of it was less a question and more, "Can we model what happened?"

This is, we had come back. It was month, year later. We were coming back to find this kind of closure. It was a really insightful, poignant process of me describing what happened and what I think was going through mind and why she did what she did, and her being like, "Nope, not here. Yep. No, that was right. Nope, not this." Then she doing the same for me.

It's not like we got back together, but there was something that released at the end, because it's really hard, at least it's really hard for me, to stay angry or hold onto something, when I could understand everything that she had done and vice versa. Agreeing with what you're saying, is that that process itself is part of the healing.

Adam Mastroianni...: Yeah. Yeah. I think the most impregnable barrier in the universe is the human skull. When two people are trying to communicate, there are two of them. We sort of despair of crossing those barriers or we can't leave our own skull and realize that we need to do some work to get into the other one, because it just feels like, "Well, but I see the world, how it is."

Aza Raskin: Something that you said was the impact of everyone wearing these virtual reality misperception goggles, is less in the kinetic space, and more in the political space. That is to say, as we misperceive what each other around us believe, that causes us to vote differently and elect people that are increasingly at the edges of the belief distribution.

One of the things we often talk about for social media, is we've long had oil companies that when they create externalities, it does great harm, but those externalities, like an oil spill, doesn't change the ability for government to legislate and create regulation and guardrails for oil companies. But when social media creates a polarization spill, its externality that in fact does make it harder for government to add any kind of guardrails. You end up in this reinforcing feedback loop.

I think there's a point that we're agreeing on here, which is to the extent that we are unable to accurately perceive the beliefs around us, the more we elect leaders that cause that schism to be reified and to grow. That leads to gridlock and people not feeling that democracy is working for them, because the thing that everyone believes, isn't the thing that's actually happening and what that sort of pushes me then into solution space around, to what extent can we up-regulate content that helps people accurately do that. That seeing of each other and be able to not just model the other side, but to know what rough percentages are on the extreme versus the not extreme.

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast
Episode 56: [Fighting With Mirages of Each Other with Adam Mastroianni](#)

Tristan Harris: In our work with Dan Vallone, we did the interview with him on perception gaps, it struck me that if you told me that my beliefs about the other side are not what I think they are and that the more I use social media, the wronger I get about what other people believe. You just told me that my brain is running malware. My emotions about the other side are actually unfounded, or not nearly as well founded as I had felt them to be.

But upon hearing these new facts that the other side doesn't believe the things that I think that they believe, to the degree that I thought, at least. It doesn't immediately shift my emotional feelings about them. In fact, I feel the same way. I'm just curious in your research and work, to what extent does knowing about the misperceptions help alleviate them?

Adam Mastroianni...: Yeah, I think we would all love it to be the case that you just show people the data, just show the graph, like show them the table and we'll just flip the switch in their head and now they won't have these misperceptions anymore. I've tried to run studies like that. They just don't work. Giving them one piece of accurate information once just isn't going to be enough, I think to undo it. Certainly I have found that it doesn't really make a difference. I think other people have as well.

But people exist in these really information rich contexts and you can't just pop in for 30 seconds and change it. That's why I think really the only way to overcome them is to shut off the sources of disinformation. The like, to look at like, "Well, why is it that this is the way that I see the world. It has something to do with the information I encounter all the time. Do I like that I'm encountering that information all the time? Some of it I can't help, but some of it I do choose. I wake up every morning and I open a certain app on my phone and it feeds me this kind of thing that leads me to have a wrong model of the world. Maybe I shouldn't do that. Maybe I should get up and do the crossword instead."

Tristan Harris: Yeah. The neuroscientist, Anil Seth calls this cognitive impenetrability. If these are the kind of optical illusions that even though I show you the optical illusion and I show you that your brain is perceiving it, just knowing that doesn't actually change your perception the next time. I think that speaks to the age old problem statement of we have paleolithic brains, medieval institutions and godlike technology.

You know, don't pet an animal against the direction of its fur. You pet an animal in the direction of where its fur is actually going. If misperceptions can't be alleviated with knowledge, it seems to me and it's the premise of our work the last many years, is that systematically the way the technology's designed has to work in such a way that it is closing and reducing misperception and perception gaps, and identifying each of those gaps. Then finding what would actually bring us closer together on all of them systematically.

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast
Episode 56: [Fighting With Mirages of Each Other with Adam Mastroianni](#)

That was the entire incentive landscape of how the platform, the design choices, not just the algorithms and ranking, but the entire design would have to be oriented in this kind of non-violent communication, better shared understanding. But the very least for communication to happen, I need to know what you're actually thinking you knew and what I am actually thinking. That double confirmation has to actually happen. That said then, do you have any other thoughts or actions listeners you think can and should take to help lessen their misperceptions?

Adam Mastroianni...: I think if you actually want to understand the world better, one way to do it is to read more history, because this world didn't just appear out of nothing this morning. Everything here got here somehow and history is an attempt to understand how it got there. Plus I think there is so much to understand about the world in order to be a well-informed person, that the news isn't going to do a good job telling you about.

It says something about the world that we live in. I mean, going back to this point that people look at the world and think that it's the world that people wanted to exist. If you look at all the worst parts of the world, you'll think, "Wow, people really desire a lot of terrible things. Seems like a lot of terrible people in the world. In fact, more than there used to be." All of which I think is untrue. I think you come to see as less true when you delete certain apps from your phone. That's the approach that I've found works for me anyway.

Tristan Harris: For a lot of listeners out there who have found themselves having lost many of their close friendships or family relationships, because of some of these misperceptions, what advice do you have for them?

Adam Mastroianni...: I think it's maybe one of the most interesting questions to ask. Why does this person that I care about have such a different perception of the world than I do? I think that's so much more an answerable question than why do these faceless people who vote for people that I hate, why do they do it?

But for these people who you had a relationship with that you now don't, can you articulate, what exactly that it is? Can you articulate it in a way that they would agree with you that that is the correct characterization? I think if you can get to the point where they would agree with you, that that's why, and that's what happened. I mean, doing this relational postmortem that we were talking about before, I think that actually, if you could successfully do that, you may in fact reignite the relationship that you had.

I think that if you do that, you might find that you had a story in your head about why this person came to believe the things that they do and why and what they believe now, that may well be wrong. They probably had the same story in their head about you. I think when you get to the point where you're asking

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast
Episode 56: [Fighting With Mirages of Each Other with Adam Mastroianni](#)

questions, you're at least to the point where you're not hurling insults and you're at least talking.

Tristan Harris:

Adam Mastroianni is a post-doctoral research scholar at Columbia Business School. He studies how people perceive and misperceive their social worlds, both in face to face interactions and in their theories about how change in the world occurs around them. Adam's work has been covered by science nature and Jimmy Kimmel. He writes a blog called Experimental History.

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. Our senior producer is Julia Scott. Mixing on this episode by Jeff Sudakin. Original music and sound design by Ryan and Hayes Holiday and a special thanks to the whole Center for Humane Technology team for making this podcast possible.

You can find show notes, transcripts, and much more at humanetech.com. A very special thanks to our generous lead supporters, including the Omidyar Network, Craig Newmark Philanthropies, and the Evolve Foundation among many others. If you made it all the way here, let me just give one more thank you to you, for giving us your undivided attention.