

Center for Humane Technology | *Your Undivided Attention* Podcast  
Spotlight: [Elon, Twitter and the Gladiator Arena](#)

Tristan Harris: Hey everyone, it's Tristan.

Aza Raskin: And I'm Aza.

Tristan Harris: Welcome to *Your Undivided Attention*, the podcast from the Center for Humane Technology. Since it's looking more and more like Elon Musk, the CEO of Tesla and SpaceX, will probably soon have ownership of Twitter, we wanted to do a special episode about what this could mean for Twitter users and the fate of democracies around the world. Twitter is a very complicated place. It's routinely blocked by governments who fear its power to organize citizen protests around the world. It's also where outrage, fear, and violence get amplified by design, warping users' views of each other and our common connected humanity.

So we're at a fork in the road. I want you to think about the trajectory of polarization in the U.S. and around the world. Think about the prospect of civil war and increasing conflict. Today on *Your Undivided Attention*, we just thought we would discuss the risks and the issues that are coming up with Elon potentially succeeding in acquiring Twitter and some of the humane design principles we might apply if we were thinking about trying to solve the problem. This is actually the second part in a two part conversation about Twitter that we've had on *Your Undivided Attention*. We'll post that first conversation about Elon Musk's bid for Twitter in the show notes. With that, here we go.

Aza Raskin: Where I think might be interesting to start this conversation is around, well, why does this even matter? Why does it matter if Elon buys Twitter? Compared to TikTok or Facebook, it doesn't have that many users, roughly the population of the U.S. What do people think matters about Elon buying Twitter? Then what's the sort of the hidden ones, the ones that people are not yet thinking about? I think one of the things you have to see is that Twitter is the attention allocation organ of society. It determines where and what we look at, because so many journalists write and decide what to write based on what's on Twitter.

Television will get their topics from the trending list and respond to things that are happening in real-time on Twitter. So the way I like to think about it, we've used this metaphor before, is that Twitter is like a brain implant into society. It rewires what we pay attention to. When Elon is in the news recently thinking about cutting 75% of Twitter engineers and employees, that's sort of taking that brain implant and firing all of the technicians. It's a really dangerous place to be.

Tristan Harris: Politicians live on Twitter. Public intellectuals live on Twitter. If Twitter is a funhouse mirror that shows you the most extreme voices, and then whenever they say stuff, those things go the most viral, so we get a double whammy of overrepresentation of the extreme people saying the extreme things going viral, that leads us to believe a very false image of what society actually looks like.

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Let's say there's a journalist who's living in that funhouse mirror all day long, and then they write news articles that then the rest of the world lives inside of.

So it's just important to get, first of all, how influential a force is in our society, and then second, that it's not a positive influence, it's a distorting influence. What started a lot of this, if you look back, and I was just skimming some of the text messages as part of the Elon deposition in the court case, looking back at the days before he was considering joining the board to the days in which he was considering potentially acquiring a stake in the company to then acquiring the entire company.

What's remarkable about these text messages is there's not a single person who's saying, "Wait, this might be really dangerous," or, "Maybe you shouldn't do this because this is a really big responsibility. This is not a science problem, like getting network engineers to build satellites and launch them to do Starlink. It's kind of a sociology conversation, human perception, human empathy problem, and that's not your expertise." No one's pushing back on him. I don't know if he really knows what he's getting himself into.

This is a different kind of problem that's about what does it take for technology plus democracy to equal stronger democracy. Twitter is a tool for understanding what's going on in the world, and it was not designed from the ground up to enable good conversation or good sense-making. Every attempt to try to enable it to be better for good conversation or good sense-making is taking an ancient Roman gladiator stadium with the tigers and the lions and the balls and the chains and the angry crowds and the red meat flying all over the place, and then saying, "Well, can we add an ID check before you get in to the gladiator stadium?"

Yeah, sure that that'd be nice. People should be able to put their ID in before you into the gladiator stadium. But can we change the game from being a Roman gladiator stadium? The ultimate challenge for Elon Musk, whose girlfriend Grimes wrote a song about him called Player of Games, is he needs to go from being the ultimate player and winner of the games that he plays, which he does. He wins them consistently and he's an astonishing force, right? We all have to acknowledge that. But will he be the transformer of games? Can he transform the ultimate video game that has perversely oriented every member of society to add division to an already fragile society?

I think the thing that I'm been most frustrated about in the public conversation is those who are making it a conversation about free speech versus censorship. So if we talk about the problem with Twitter as being free speech or censorship, we are missing the point that Twitter is a bad sense-making machine, which I think Elon is actually tuning into and he's so frustrated about the crazy political voices that are upset at him on Twitter. He thinks that the world's gone crazy,

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and it's because he's getting a personalized feed of all the crazy people in his DMs, in his inbox, plus amplified by the bots.

So he's having a more and more distorted view. This is the grand irony of the whole machine that we're talking about is that the very problem we're trying to point out itself has people misassess what the problem is because they constantly get exposed to the funhouse mirror, to the outrage machine, and then it leads them to be more triggerable, more sensitive, more upset at phantoms that are exaggerated in their size and presence compared to how big they actually are.

Aza Raskin: One thing that we've been talking about a lot recently, and it's a new concept to describe something we have seen a lot of but haven't been able to name is that of a zombie value and free speech as an example of that. So maybe that's a useful topic to bring up because perhaps that will let us escape the free speech versus censorship debate.

Tristan Harris: Yeah. So one of the things that Aza and I've been in back and forth about is this idea of zombie values and zombie institutions, that part of E. O. Wilson's claim that the fundamental problem of humanity is we have paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions and godlike technology. Well, medieval institutions includes law and laws and the philosophy and concepts behind laws.

When John Stuart Mill wrote the book *On Liberty* about the need to respect our individual liberties and not to interfere with other people's choices, he didn't write that in the age of synthetic media where we could flood the internet with fake speech or manipulate other people's parties. He didn't write that in the age where I could print a pandemic in my basement and I could tweet out the code for a dangerous virus, and anybody could print that at home. If he knew about those technologies, he would've never written the book *On Liberty*.

So we need to take a closer look at the zombie ideas and zombie values and zombie institutions that are upholding ideas that, again, like you said Aza, are pointing at a value that we hold dear, like the safety to critique the system that you're in, the assumptions of the system that you're in without fear of going to jail or being stoned to death or things like that. So the many things that the value of free speech is pointing to, you and I both want to live in that value. That's why we live in the United States. We live in an open society, but we need a 21st century vision of an open society that is able to upgrade its zombie values and zombie institutions to something that's a 21st century enlivened, recapitulated value and institution.

Elon has typically talked about, he has this line that's like, "Well, if the speech will incite violence, then we can actually take down that speech. Let's have that be the red line." But that is totally inadequate to the new world that we're living

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in. What that misses is that Twitter daily, through the daily operation of its business model, rewards increasing the potential energy for violence because the better I am at saying, "Here's why the other side is so bad, and here's what they said when they almost hinted that they were going to kill us and they're buying more guns," when I'm doing that, every single time I tweet those things, I'm increasing the amount of potential energy for violence in the system, even though no actual physical violence shows up except on a January 6th day.

I think what I want people to get is not putting a red line on the kinetic energy for violence, but a red line on the potential energy for violence. Let's not have a system in which we score and we pay out a hundred times more points the more you add in potential violence. Let's have a system in which you're adding potential consensus, bridge building, perspective expansion. Let's have that be the thing that we reward with the most points, likes, followers, reach.

I think that what we need to actually solve E. O. Wilson's challenge of paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions and godlike tech is we need to embrace our paleolithic emotions. We need to understand our own paleolithic limits, the cognitive biases, the confirmation bias of our brains. We need to upgrade our medieval and zombie institutions and zombie values, and we need to have the wisdom to wield our godlike technology. We definitely need the people at the top of our society to wake up and act from a wiser place.

Aza Raskin: Yeah. This is something I think Elon could do starting tomorrow, is that he could say, "Ah, actually, we've all been captured by free speech versus censorship, but that's not the right game."

Tristan Harris: Again, the gladiator stadium version of reality. That's what we have right now. We have gladiator stadiums, not courtrooms. We have gladiator stadiums, not public squares. I mean, imagine you replaced every society, every city and all the sort of public squares and libraries and schools and town halls with just gladiator stadiums everywhere, and fashion runways because that's the influencer culture side. So you have fashion runways and gladiator stadiums, and that's what we have as the new landscape for humanity.

I want to address one thought quickly, which is that there's this whole scandal around how many bots really are on Twitter. In fact, Elon was trying to cancel the deal because of the number of bots, the percentage of Twitter's user base that are bots being higher than what Twitter disclosed in the acquisition talks, which was 5%. Twitter said something like 5% of its users are bots. Elon's like, "Well, actually the independent research says, well, maybe it's way more than that. It could be way more than that."

A friend of ours, Farhad Mohit, had actually done a calculation and framed it in a very clever way that I liked, which is that imagine telling someone, "Well, I have

an army, but only 5% of my army are terminators." Think about what that means. A terminator can kill a million times more people in one hour than a regular person because they're a terminator. They're a supercharged AI powered machine that doesn't have to eat, doesn't have to drink, doesn't have to sleep. It just gets to maximally act, right?

Currently, if I'm a Twitter bot, the current Twitter API, meaning the interface, the programmatic interface where a bot can sort of do things with a remote control on Twitter is that they can post 800 times per hour as a bot. No human will post 800 times per hour. I mean, honestly, the average person doesn't post even once an hour, right? I don't even post once a day. Imagine that you now have only 5% of your users are bots, but they're all posting 800 times an hour, our researcher friend estimates that as much as 80% of Twitter's total activity may be driven by bots, even if only 5% of the users are actual bots. I think this is an important thing for people to think about.

One of the calls I would make to Elon is to not re-platform anyone until you actually solve the bot problem, because I know that's something that Elon does really care about is there's bots scamming people everywhere and posting a million things around the site. One of the things that the bots tend to swarm around are the most divisive, polarizing, outrage-driven people, which tend to be a lot of the people that got de-platformed. So when you re-platform those people, the bots just go surge behind them. So don't re-platform these people until you solve the bot problem. Because if we want to have an actual public square, which I know is what Elon cares about, and actual free speech, which is free of manipulated speech, free of non-human speech, then let's actually solve the bot problem.

Aza Raskin:

I would say if Elon, or more likely someone in Elon's orbit is listening, the one thing I think you could do, realizing that people problems are much harder than engineering problems, and that wading into this debate is going to end up being much, much harder and more trouble than it's worth, is buy out Twitter and then get it to someone, like re-own it inside of Wikimedia, which runs Wikipedia, to turn Twitter really into a public resource. Give it to Mozilla, which is a non-profit that's in public benefit. Give it to them or a consortium of these folks that have proven their effectiveness. That way, you get to wash your hands from it while also being remembered as the person who saved, in a sense, open society.

Tristan Harris:

Yeah. I mean, classically what always happens at Facebook or Twitter is Facebook says, "We have these bad actors who are using our platform in bad ways and we want to get those bad actors off of our good platform." Whereas the real thing is the problem with Facebook is Facebook. The problem with Twitter is Twitter. The opportunity for Elon in the short term, the triage level solutions. We talk about solutions in three different timelines. riage, which is

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immediate small things that they could do, things like taking the limit from you can post 800 times per hour if you're a bot to you can only post four times an hour, that would be a great triage solution. It doesn't harm Twitter's revenue too much. It doesn't force them to change their business model. It doesn't require legislation, but it's a triage solution as something they could do tomorrow that would make it a little bit better.

Aza Raskin: Yeah. I think that this would be one direction that we could take Twitter to make it better at cohering society.

Tristan Harris: Then there's transition solutions, things like the Platform Accountability and Transparency Act, the first law that would require all major platforms above a certain size to be able to be transparent to researchers who'd be able to measure and understand some of the harms that we've been talking about in this show. This is the first simple law that really everyone should get behind to be able to enable the public around the world to research the questions that matter most and create deterrents, because the companies would know that the public would be able to find out about many of these harms, and because they would know that we would know, they would start to work on fixing them faster. So it's one of the simple things that we can do right now.

Then there's having an open source algorithm, maybe changing the business model. These are transition solutions, and there's long term, which is how do we have entirely built from the ground up technology plus democracy equals stronger democracy, more like the Taiwan episode we did with Audrey Tang. I think that there's a lot of opportunity to turn Twitter from a social heating machine that is increasing the boiling temperature for the entire society to being more of a social cooling machine that's actually cooling down and enhancing the kind of cohesion of society.

Aza Raskin: Then Elon is saying, "Let's punish every tweet that makes a little place of boiling versus let's turn the whole pot of water down."

Tristan Harris: I think that's the whole point. It's not about creating peace, it's not a Kumbaya machine, but it's about creating more shared understanding and more cohesion rather than more decohesion. One last thing for the national security community to think about is consider a day when the Chinese Communist Party calls Elon up and says, "We want you to include this thing in Starlink." Or, "We need some info on that upcoming satellite launch that you're going to do for the National Reconnaissance Office. If you don't do those things that we want, we'll nationalize Tesla in China." What would Elon do?

Elon's entire situation right now is based on Tesla having a high stock price, and if that fell, it would completely change the game for him. China has a lot of ways to interfere with Tesla. So I think people should really take into consideration the

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amount of leverage that the Chinese Communist Party, the U.S.'s number one geopolitical competitor, would have over the person who's actually running the U.S. cultural infrastructure. So I think this is a tremendous risk area that the national security community, I would put at near the top of my list, given that population centric information warfare has become one of the dominant forms of warfare in the 21st century.

Aza Raskin:

All right. Let's leave it there. This I think has been a really interesting conversation, but we're trying to do our best to spread these good ideas and get them to the people in positions to do something about it. So here's a request. If you know anyone at those say overseeing mergers and acquisitions at a National Security Agency or the U.S. Commerce Secretary, please forward this episode to them or anyone who can make a difference. If you know Elon Musk or those in his orbit, send this episode to them too.

Now, the last thing is *Your Undivided Attention* is about to have its first ever Ask Us Anything episode. If there are questions you'd love to ask Tristan or me about the show or about *The Social Dilemma*, or more broadly about our work at the Center for Humane Technology, this is your opportunity. So go to [humanetech.com/askus](https://humanetech.com/askus). Thanks for giving us *Your Undivided Attention*.