

Center for Humane Technology | *Your Undivided Attention* Podcast
Spotlight: [Humane Technology on 60 Minutes](#)

Tristan Harris: Hey, everyone. It's Tristan.

So the weekly American news show 60 Minutes asked me if they could interview me for a segment with anchor Bill Whitaker on our work at the Center for Humane Technology and about my thoughts on political polarization, social media, and specifically the anger and incivility that gets elevated on these platforms as a matter of corporate profit.

It aired this past Sunday, November 6th, just ahead of the American midterm elections, and I saw it as a good opportunity to put some visibility into the larger questions that we've been exploring on the show.

So we're releasing a special episode of this podcast this week to get further into some of the important nuances of the complexity of this problem.

And if you're new to the podcast, then thank you for joining us and welcome.

This interview with 60 Minutes was personally significant for me because our work was introduced to the world in 2017 when I did a 60 Minutes interview with Anderson Cooper. And back then, we actually introduced so many of the concepts that we're now talking about.

Even phrases like 'the attention economy' or 'the race to the bottom of the brain stem to hijack our attention' or the idea of persuasive technology that is made with design choices that influence psychological vulnerabilities, that play with our vices instead of our values; all of those were new concepts back in 2017 when we first kind of emerged on the public stage, and it was 60 Minutes that first created a platform for our work. So we were really excited when 60 Minutes reached out to us earlier this summer.

And I really enjoyed doing this interview because we covered some novel ground around the social media problem. Instead of talking about censorship or free speech or content moderation, we were talking about the real root of the problem, which is the engagement based business model.

It's not about just privacy or antitrust, as is commonly the view in Washington. If you break up one of these or several of these companies, what are the new companies going to be competing for? They're still going to be competing for engagement and growth at all costs. They're still going to raise venture capital that expects them to get 10 to a hundred X returns on their investment, which means being really aggressive in the race for engagement. And the race for engagement always translates into design choices that will create a more addicted, distracted, outraged, polarized, validation seeking and narcissistic society.

We also got to focus on national security and the problem of TikTok.

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Right now, if you go to Washington, the main conversation about TikTok is about data protection and privacy. There's rumors that there's a deal between the Biden administration about to be signed with ByteDance, the company that owns TikTok, to make sure that the data doesn't leave, say, American soil.

But even if we protect the data, it still allows ByteDance, or TikTok, to psychologically control what is at the center of attention of China's number one geopolitical adversary, which is the United States, and across the West.

It's about protecting against foreign psychological influence so long as a Chinese Communist Party controlled company can actually influence and change the dials for which voices we hear from and don't hear from in our own society.

That is a new kind of power, but is basically the mechanism of changing soft power around the world.

And so, because we don't have laws for psychological influence, but we do have laws for things like data protection, we see regulation around data protection, but we don't see laws or regulation around psychological influence because we don't even have a philosophical concept to base that on.

We also busted the myth that if you're not on social media, you shouldn't be concerned with these problems. The most common response I get when we talk about these issues publicly is people come up and then they say, "Well, I don't use social media", or, "I have a Facebook account, but I don't use it very much." And they assume that what the conversation is about is their own personal usage.

But what it's really about is the collective usage. For example, with climate change, I may only fly on a plane once a year, so what's the big deal? But it's not about what one person does, it's how the collective choices and the collective behavior create the climate change of culture.

So we're already hearing from people who saw the 60 Minutes piece whose perspective has actually been shifted significantly.

Before they may have thought they were immune from the problem, and what I think we captured in this interview is how, even if you're not on social media, you still live in a country that will vote based on how other people are influenced by what's on social media.

I actually said that, imagine if 50% of the world saw this 60 Minutes interview and they said, "Oh my gosh, it is this outrage for profit system on Twitter, and I'm no longer going to post anymore. I'm going to be kind, I'm going to be thoughtful, and I'm never going to post something inflammatory."

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Well, the Twitter system, when you log in the next day, doesn't just say, "Well, here's all the calm stuff." It turns the AI algorithms, like this Eye of Sauron, onto this different pocket of Twitter, which is where all the inflammation is still happening. And then it ports over all of that inflammation to the center of attention of society.

Facebook's head of policy, Monika Bickert, said in this interview that social media can't be the root of America's anger because it's actually people over the age of 60 who are getting most polarized, and that is the group that is least likely to use social media.

But our answer to that is that social media is upstream from influencing all forms of media.

How do the television producers at MSNBC or Fox News figure out what to put on the air? They look to Twitter's trending topics algorithm, and they cover the most inflammatory fault lines in the culture wars.

Twitter and the algorithms are upstream from even all this other media that we consume. So in a way, we are all users of Twitter, even though only 300 million or so people actually have full accounts on Twitter.

But the real problem with Twitter isn't the content on Twitter, it's that Twitter is kind of a gladiator stadium, like a Roman Coliseum, where people are being told that they need to debate free speech and ideas in a marketplace of ideas with balls and chains and arrows and swords and goring each other. And this is not the right kind of social space to be governing democracy.

But why is it that we have a Roman Coliseum to debate our ideas in? Why is Twitter designed to put us globally in touch with the entire world's ideas and anger all at once? Why doesn't Twitter design for smaller social spaces, for 10 people to go deep on a topic?

Well, it's because Twitter's business model of engagement is about making sure that every post, every moment of anger, every moment of controversy is as maximally visible and interactive with as many other people as possible because that's what makes it sticky. You click on one little exchange of outrage and then you click on another one and another one.

And moreover, one of the other dynamics that isn't talked about very much is that, as the attention economy gets more and more competitive, every TV channel, every newspaper, every blog has to get more and more aggressive to keep the audience that they already have.

We often call this 'audience capture.' For each of those platforms, you have to make it as inflammatory as possible to make sure that you keep getting the clicks

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no matter where it lands on the internet. All of that travels through the algorithms of social media.

So one thing I should say is that the interview on 60 Minutes was not about one company. We were not trying to bash Facebook or bash Twitter or bash TikTok. It's about an entire ecosystem and the business model of engagement that's driving all of these companies to do things that generally make a more addicted, outraged, polarized, narcissistic society.

We spent more than two hours with the 60 Minutes team, and we didn't know which pieces they would actually be covering. We know that they were focused on political polarization, but in the piece, we also covered our concerns about TikTok that many listeners of this podcast will remember.

We've been concerned that the issues with TikTok are not about data privacy and whether or not Western countries' data is accessible by the Chinese government, which is often how the debate is framed in Washington or in regulator circles. It's about the ability for the Chinese Communist Party, which has influence over ByteDance, to actually play with the dials about which countries hear from which voices.

We know that the media that we consume does shape the kind of people that come out the other end. There's simply a consequence to choosing different values to govern the media that actually influences your population.

I want to share a personal story that I was just recently in New Zealand and I was with a Chinese tech entrepreneur, and he actually opened his phone and showed me right there in front of me that, when he opened the Chinese version of TikTok for him that he uses when he's in China, immediately it showed him financial advice about how to grow wealthy; they highlighted a video about quantum physics and the Nobel Prize, basically trying to make people interested in kind of what the latest science is; and they showed videos of Xi Jinping and the 20th Party Congress.

And then the second later, he opened up the TikTok for the rest of the world, and immediately it was just the most mindless garbage. And yet, this is just the world that we live in.

So this is a real phenomenon, no matter what the motivations of it are.

One view is that the Chinese Communist Party is deliberately skewing TikTok to be corrosive to western culture and values and sending us down the rabbit hole, downgrading and degrading our attention spans, our education levels, our thoughtfulness, our critical thinking. And that's really not what I'm proposing.

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But at the least we can say that the Chinese Communist Party is regulating their domestic version of TikTok because they do recognize that it influences the education level, the values, the aspirations, the careers of the people in their society.

And in the 60 Minutes interview, we said that ByteDance ships the spinach version of TikTok to its citizens domestically in China, while it ships the opium version of TikTok to the rest of the world.

Now, the word 'opium' is triggering because of the history of the Opium Wars and British colonization of China. What I was really trying to say is that China actually ships the kind of mindless donuts version that keeps the rest of the world in a kind of trap of amusing themselves to death; to borrow the title of the book by Neil Postman: *Amusing Ourselves to Death*; that when you have one society running trivia as its main source of information for many years, and you have another society running educational videos, science experiments, patriotism videos, museum exhibits, I can tell you what those two societies are going to look like 10 years from now.

And as I mentioned in this interview, the number one aspired to career in China is astronaut, while the number one most aspired to career in the United States is social media influencer.

Keep in mind TikTok is the number one most used social media app in many countries around the west, including I believe now, in the United States. And so if TikTok is the number one source of information, and politicians actually have to be on TikTok to get elected, what does that say about TikTok as essentially the indirect voting machine for the entire world?

This is what needs to change, and so that's the thing I wanted to focus on.

I was so proud that 60 Minutes covered the business model of competing for engagement at all costs and how, if I don't go lower in the race to the bottom of the brain stem, I'll lose to the actors that do.

And that has been the core critique of the Center for Humane Technology for the last 10 years. It's not about one of these problems, it's about how a whole system of incentives needs to be changed.

By the way, if you missed the 60 Minutes episode and you want to watch it, you can find it at humanetech.com/60minutes.

One final note; the podcast is hiring for a new executive producer. We're looking for an experienced audio editor who can lead our podcast team, oversee the entire podcast production process, and maintain the level of intellectual quality that we work so hard to maintain.

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If you have deep alignment with our mission and vision for how we can grow, then we'd love for you to apply. You can find the job description at humanetech.com/careers.

Pass it along to anyone you think would be interested. And thank you once again for giving us your undivided attention.