No Turning Back: Tristan Harris

CHRIS: Thanks for joining us. Okay. Looking forward to this discussion with Tristan Harris, Tristan is really an exceptional leader in the tech space. Um, if you've seen the documentary "Social Dilemma" on Netflix, or if you're even deep, more deeply invested in thinking about the future of how technology, social media should be leveraged in our society, then you're familiar with, uh, Tristan and his work. Uh, he's a, he's a young guy came up in the tech space.

Um, but early on had, uh, an awareness and a recognition that how we were leveraging technology, especially in the social media domain, uh, the, the addictive nature of the devices that surround us, um, as a knock on effect of all of that development was having, uh, questionable facts and, and development uncertainty about the long-term future and how the tech sector broadly was thinking about, uh, its its use of technology and technology's role in society.

And so, our conversation today focuses around that. And what's interesting about Tristan he's- he is not a, a troglodyte, he's not opposed to the use of technology and society. What he's saying is this is such an important change for us as a society. We should be thinking much more deeply about its effects and how we should be regulating its use, et cetera.

Um, you can find out more about the work that he's doing at the Center for Humane Technology, which Tristan founded and is the CEO of that's that human, humane tech, H U M A N E T E C H .com or just Google Tristan Harris online. And you can find out all about the work that he's focused on. Great discussion here.

Uh, hope you get as much out of it as Stan and I did. And there's a lot more to be learned in this space now over to Tristan. Just on behalf of Stan and myself, thank you for taking the time. I'm really, really looking forward to this discussion. You are, uh, center mass in one of the most important discussions going on in our society, uh, globally right now, in my opinion, amongst the top two or three that we really have to figure out in this generation.

And so excited to hear your thoughts on, on the role of leadership in, in that sector. I'm going to turn it over to Stan here in a second, to kick us off with the first point of discussion, but I want to open with a quote and it's from you, which I think is really powerful and helps set the stage, the stage where you said, um, never before in history have 20 to 35 year old white guys in California made decisions that would have an impact on 2 billion people, 2 billion people will have thoughts that they didn't intend to have because a designer at Google said, this is how notifications work on that screen, that you wake to in the morning, we have a moral responsibility as Google for solving this problem.

Um, and I mean, that's, that's heavy language and it states a problem. I, I worry that most people, not only are they not thinking about, wouldn't know where to start with that point. It's just not in the social conversation anywhere near where it should be. And I don't, the last six months hasn't accelerated that to anywhere near where it should be.

So with that as a scene setter that are going to turn to our stand, we can dive in.

STAN: Yeah, Tristan. Thanks said, and I'm excited to have you here as well, but I'm also a little bit frightened by the conversation to be honest, because I do a lot of reading and study and like you, I watched what happened the sixth of January, and I know that we are dealing with something the equivalent of kryptonite in the superhero world or nuclear power.

And we don't fully appreciate it. When I was a senior officer, I learned I'd go places. And if I asked certain questions, I'd get canned answers. And so I would usually stop and say, what am I not asking you? But I ought to be asking. So I'm going to ask you this about leadership and technology. What are we not asking ourselves?

What are we not exploring that we need to understand?

TRISTAN HARRIS: Yeah, well, first, just to repeat it right back at you, that I'm, I'm just incredibly honored to have this conversation with you and, uh, uh, I'm so glad to be able to bring it, bring it to your audience. Um, what are the converse? What are the questions that we're not even asking?

Well, first I just want to make clear, you know, so it also contextualizes it for those who, who hopefully will have, will have seen the Social Dilemma, uh, which, which on Netflix, uh, I think really detailed some of the problems that we'll probably be digging into. Um, uh, because there's, there's many different problems, but I, and there's many different deep questions we could ask about it because on one level we have, um, powerful technology that is subtle in why we should be so concerned about it.

I mean, if you literally take your phone right now, you know, if I took it, I don't have it with me, but if I took out my phone and I opened up Facebook and I see the little blue bar and I start seeing a couple photos of friends and I see their cat photos and a birthday and maybe a political piece. I look at that, there's my phenomenological experience.

I got 10 seconds to just hit my nervous system. Okay. Where's the harm in that? What we're saying, this is nuclear power? Does that seem like nuclear power? You, your kids, they open up Tik Tok, you know, and they see 10 videos and they lose, you know, an hour of their, of their life or something. Does that feel like nuclear power? Does that feel like an epoch change?

Um, I think what's so difficult about these issues is just how subtle they are. Uh, because they don't intuitively hit us as exponential. Um, and, and just to kind of maybe frame some of this conversation, we always go back in our organization, the Center for Humane Technology to, uh, the Harvard sociobiologist EO Wilson, who said that the fundamental problem of humanity is that we have paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions, and then accelerating God-like technology.

And I think that's important because if we ask, okay, so why is it that we're not perceiving technology as nuclear? Well, it's because our paleolithic emotions are not designed to wrap our heads around almost like Einstein's, that we can't wrap our head around exponential curves.

That's one of the ways that our paleolithic minds and cognitive biases don't wrap their heads around big exponential problems our minds don't wrap their heads around I think exponential, psychological influence. That to, to go to your, your first quote, Chris, from me about, you know, you got those 10 designers, a hundred designers have designers in our rooms at Facebook, Google, Twitter, Tik Tok.

And they're making these decisions about how say a newsfeeds kind of work. And that newsfeed is used by about three billion people. getting closer to three billion people. I mean, that's, Facebook's aggregate user number, but you know, we're getting there with all the other platforms. If you make just a subtle tweak by even one degree and you don't even know what you're gonna impact, it's like climate change, right?

Like you just change things by one degree, and suddenly there's this complex emergent system that's going to change a whole bunch of ecosystems. You didn't even realize. You're going to change the dynamics of trust in society. You're going to change their relationships. You're going to change people's brains.

So the, the attention spans and ways that people are able to read. If I try to read a book, that's on my bookshelf, I can't do that nearly as well as I could do before. And so the subtlety of what we're changing in ourselves, what question are we not asking is like, how are we changing ourselves? And if the very instrument that you would use to appraise, what's changing in us, is the thing that's changing, meaning your brain is your way of appraising reality.

It's a way of getting perception, but if the very impact that we're talking about is changing the way that our brains are able to make sense of the world, including how we discern truth, uh, you know, the January 6th events, things like that-- polarization. Uh, it makes it very hard to try to wrap our heads around it. So I think what we need to do is become, you know, there's no question that, especially in the West, the United States is, you know, one of the most sophisticated countries in the world in terms of technology, but we haven't been sophisticated about is human nature pointing the telescope back at ourselves.

Uh, supposedly, uh, I, I believe it's the case from Stewart Brand, the founder of the Whole Earth catalog that it took us something like 10 years after we had gotten all the, you know, I don't know, satellites and, and things in the space, we're putting the telescopes out there to try to look at the stars. It took us 10 years before we said, Hey, did anybody think to turn the camera back around and take a photo of earth of ourselves?

You know? And that's kind of like technology, we're so obsessed with creating the next thing. Are we looking back and saying, how has it shaped us? And I think this climate change of culture metaphor, hopefully we'll come back to that because I think that's appropriate way to think about the various complex effects, uh, in the same way that an in climate change, you have the coral bleaching, you have melting of the, of the permafrost, you get methane, you get an ocean acidification and those seem like different issues, but in a complex way, they add up to something really disastrous in the same way, the fraying of social trust. Increasing tribalism, shortening of attention, spans more alienation, which makes people more vulnerable to conspiracy thinking and suspicion.

These are all a collective system of effects that go into the climate change of culture that I think come from the fact that technology hasn't been appropriately perceiving the human social primate, that's sitting across the piece of glass that it's, uh, that it's targeting.

CHRIS: Um, there's, there's a lot to unpack there obviously, but the, um, the that's a great framing.

A point I'd like to come back to at some point in the discussion is, um, you know, because we're talking here and before we started around the comparison to, you know, is, is this a nuclear threat? You know, there are not great examples in human history of something that could be globally destructive. Um, being solved before the problem became unrecoverable.

And so in the Cold War, we knew what these weapons could, could do. We dropped them just on small occasions, but we knew the power there. And so there was, there was a incentive to have decades of discussions about how to prevent that. Again, the, this question as, as with climate change, it may be unrecoverable before there's an incentive to really talk about it.

Right. So let's, let's put that in the parking lot and come back to it. Cause I want to, I want to go back down to a more basic level and I'm sure you get this question all the time, but I, I really do think it's important to start here. Maybe build out. Um, and selfishly, as a, as a parent, what should people be thinking about with their eight, 10, 12 year old children what's the right time or is there a right time in today's world to introduce them to technology?

TRISTAN HARRIS: You know, in a way, Chris, to your, to your point about the research. Like we, we, if we did, if we had, I think the NIH actually currently has a study on the impact of, of smartphones on brains and it's going to take something like, you know, I don't know how many years it's running for several years before they'll get the results back.

I think what we have to do here is. Look at kind of, what do we know about some of the ways that this is affecting people? There there's an organization called Wait til Eighth, which basically recommends that in terms of a smartphone, not giving your kids a smartphone until eighth grade or basically age 13. That's a smartphone.

That's not social media. I actually don't think social media should be in the hands of, of, of our kids, frankly. I mean, I, I know that that's going to be a controversial statement. People are going to say you can't put the genie back in the bottle. I understand the social pressures that parents face, because if their kid says I'm out of this thing, but then all their friends still use it.

And social and sexual opportunities are still mediated by your friends, still being on Tik Tok and Instagram and gossiping. You're going to be socially excluded. That's what makes it so hard to kind of unpack, uh, to eject yourself from, from this the system. But I think, you know, uh, there's a lot of research on, uh, actually on our website, we have a page called ledger.humanetech.com.

It's called the ledger of harms where we try to look at what are the effects that we do know about. We do know that, um, Uh, I think kids who are cyber bullied, uh, have three times more likely suicidal ideation, um, and cyber bullying is a, is a prevalent phenomenon because, uh, essentially Instagram and Tik TOK profit from drama snowballs.

So if you think about a momentary piece of drama, when you and I were growing up, you know, in the physical playgrounds, there's some drama, kids will talk about it. They'll still gossip about it, but it's a local. A local event, mediated by face-to-face conversations or maybe a phone call. Right? You change

that to that's piece of drama that someone's screwed up, or they said something, uh, you know, made a mistake.

It gets posted somewhere. It explodes into this snowball. Where suddenly you have 300 other kids in the school commenting on it. Someone's saying, Oh my God, did you see it? Then they're roping in their parents. Then it spreads virally because uh, you know, that if you remember the Twitter in case you missed it feature.

So if you miss the drama from 48 hours ago, they'll make sure because of the attention economy, that the thing that gets the most attention should come back. So we pull back that outrage in the drama snowballs continue. I think this creates an environment of social pressure of social anxiety, of, of, uh, lower risk-taking.

 Um, Jonathan height, uh, the NYU sociologist, a social psychologist, who's in the film, the Social Dilemma talks about the effects on teenagers in terms of, uh, mental health and depression, which we're actually about two decades in decline, uh, up until 2009. And then suddenly it goes up by, I think it's 150%, um, uh, and all that's in the film, the Social Dilemma for getting the exact stats.

But yeah, there's lots of different effects we could be talking about even there. Right? There's changing of attention, spans there's mental health, there's suicidal ideation. These are, these are different effects and they affect boys and girls differently in different ages. What I would say is, again, do the people who are building these products, do they have our best interests in mind?

Not that they're mustache, twirling, evil geniuses who just want to profit off of the destruction of a generation. I genuinely don't believe that. My friends in college at Stanford actually started Instagram. Mike Krieger is a, a good, good old friend of mine. And these guys had good intentions. Um, and when they invented the like button, they didn't realize they were creating these social validation loops that that would, you know, basically addict a kind of a whole generation and actually even shift the underlying values where kids are growing up now, valuing.

 That the thing that's worth being in the world, is validated by others as being famous is having a million followers on your YouTube channel or on your Instagram account. Um, and so there's a lot to say about this, but all I would say is that if, you know, when I was growing up, um, and we use say educational software or computer, which I would fully endorse for people, uh, or games that are built to be educational, um, they had child psychologists that they employ.

They had PhDs who are experts in Piaget's theories of childhood development say, okay, well, what would really help kids grow? I can assure you that at Tik Tok and at Instagram and at, uh, Snapchat, they do not hire child psychologists to ask, what's good for these guys, right? They're there, their literal metrics, their dashboards.

If you walk into their offices, they'll have a big TV screen, some 50 inch TV screen, and it'll have a few numbers on it. The numbers are seven day actives. Meaning how many days of the last, sorry, how many users that in the last seven days, um, used it at least once.

Um, there's a metric at Facebook called six out of seven called in the last seven days uh, how many of our users used it for six out of the last seven days? And that's kind of the way that they track that a product is well used, so they don't have child psychologists asking. How many kids are, are feeling well or feeling strong or are feeling, you know, socially validated or feeling secure in themselves?

What are their developmental needs, attachment styles? They're not monitoring any of that. They're just monitoring is it keeping, keep kids engaged because the business model is, are we getting your attention and more of it next month than this month? And it's a simple, even version of that is the CEO of Netflix saying, you know, our biggest competitor is sleep.

And that's because they're all competing for this one resource, which is attention. And if you can't get it from the waking hours of the day, you got to start eating into the sleepless hours of the day. And again, no, there's no evil here. There's no negative intention. It's just that this is the ecology much like our planet is a finite environment.

We only have so many environmental resources we can mind before we kind of toast it. Um, we have a finite amount of human attention to mine and we gotta make sure we put in some, some guard rails so that we're protecting, you know, human's best interests and, and frankly, our capacity to solve our real problems.

CHRIS: Just a comment.

I spoke about it and I'm turning over to Stan for for a follow-up to that. But, um, I talked about in the intro, the Social Dilemma, um, uh, w I have two movies in the last 15 years that I tell everybody, you have to watch this film, uh, Social Dilemma, and Restrepo. So when we were the peak of the war and, uh, in Afghanistan and Iraq, tell if you don't understand what the average soldiers going through an infantry soldier watch Restrepo. It's the best capture of that in the modern age and Social Dilemma is, should be required across the board, agree or disagree on the, on the outcomes. People have to understand what's going on in this space. So I applaud you and others that were involved in putting it together.

TRISTAN HARRIS: I'll need to see Restrepo, that's on my list. Please do. Yeah.

STAN: Yeah. I'm going to make a couple of comments because they relate to what Chris said.

Then I'm going to ask a question and the first comment is sometimes the explosive nature of this seems good. We remember Mohammad Bouazizi. The young Tunisian who tragically self emulated himself, and it was filmed in Tunisia. And then it of course led to the Arab spring. And in many ways I and others looked at that was a positive thing.

It got the word out quickly and it coalesced crowds. On the other hand, during our time in Iraq at the height of the fight against Al Qaeda in Iraq, their tactic for car bombs was typically three vehicles. There was a, a vehicle that guided the other two vehicles to the target and then it turned off. And then there was the actual car bomb driven by an unfortunate person sometimes who was chained in the car and that person, that person had a clicker, to click it off.

And then there was a third vehicle and the third vehicle was the camera vehicle. They filmed it and it was the most important vehicle. They also had a clicker in case the bomber lost their nerve, but they filmed it. And what would happen is we think about traditional terrorist incident, if you around it, it is terrifying.

If you are a further distance away, it's upsetting but less so. If you're a long distance away, it's a new story. Unless they put it out on video, carefully choreographed as they did, and they could do it in hours. And so they would take each horrific event and they would magnify its effect many times over.

So as a consequence, an entire nation was terrified. Even though they may be hundreds of miles from the nearest terrorist attack. And so the power of this stuff. But now I'm going to get to, we get this power and we become leaders. Let's say we're an aspiring 30 something. And we want to run for Congress, or we want to get a position of authority.

And we say, well, we don't really believe in this social media use. That's dangerous stuff, but we find ourselves in this wrestling match. And suddenly we're doing it to win, arguing that it's necessary. And pretty soon we become part of that environment that scares me. Any observations on that Tristan?

TRISTAN HARRIS: Yeah.

Um, well, two things you're making me think back to my, my one political science international security class at Stanford, where Scott Sagan said that that, uh, you know, terrorism is a strategy and that he reframed 9/11 as a, you know, also a propaganda and persuasion psychology strategy. Um, and, uh, Yeah.

I, I just, I think that's what you said is so, so important. In terms of what you're talking about of politicians not having another, another choice. I think most of the real problems that face us in the world right now are multipolar traps or tragedy of the commons, races to the cliff, if I don't do it, the other guy will, and then I'll lose.

So if you know, one politician's playing the outrage game, playing the demagogue game, playing the I'll, just say whatever works with my tuning fork, that gets the most attention from the audience and the base. And then the other guy says, I don't want to do that. I just want to speak really calm, powerful truth that I think of which direction we need to go.

And if we live, if those two actors are, uh, saying those speech utterances in an environment where the one who uses the tuning fork and gets the maximum outrage gets maximum distribution. And the guy who just says, well, here's the direction I think the country needs to go. They'll-- that speeches isn't rewarded.

It's like walking into a wrestling match where we didn't set up any rules. And one guy pulls out a knife and wins the match, but it's like, well, that's not the rules of the game. So the real problem is what are the rules of the game that would allow the kind of values that a democratic society, if we are going to be one, which you can, when doing the things that we would hope would be rewarded, but what were the ways we express ourselves about what's true.

What, which, you know, what policy will actually win. Um, you know, and as you said, there's a feedback loop where the more iterations you go through this sort of, uh, game, uh, the more we become this way.

So I think there's this question of, you know, politicians get used to saying whatever works more, use the tuning fork more, fall into this race, to the bottom of the brainstem, to, uh, you know, get their base riled up, uh, and use anger.

I was talking to frankly, a couple of political consultants, one on the left and one of the right. And he said, you know, Tristan, we, we host these focus groups. And we'll have 4,000 people. And we literally just, we have a meter that says, how angry did this make you? And we'll, we'll figure out which things make people the most angry.

And then that's what these automated email systems just blast out to everyone. Right. And when you realize that that's how our, our system is just wired right now. We, you know, I think what we have to do is get back to the, not that there is ever this sort of naturalistic fallacy or a garden of Eden of American politics.

But, um, You know, forged in the aftermath of world war two, a sense of a common, uh, moral commonplace that we're coming from a common value, a common purpose. Uh, I love your ideas, the don't of the, uh, uh, uh, the national sort of civilian service. I think we need, we need something like that. We need things that reboot some shared identity, uh, for, from where we are and in a different game for it.

I mean, things like a fairness doctrine, things like some real guard rails that set up, not just unrestricted do whatever works in a new game theoretic environment in which kind of the worst aspects of human nature get most rewarded. So there's not a clean answer to that question, but I think that's the thing that if we were to sort of take the top minds of a generation to Camp David for three months, until they figured this whole situation out with social media, that would be one of it.

What are the rules of the game for a healthy attention economy that actually upgrades the capacity of our democracy, as opposed to right now kind of degrading the, the core tissues and organs that make it up?

STAN: Well, I think you nailed something important Tristan. When I go back to my first experiences with Chris, we were in a very difficult part of the fight.

That was a pretty dirty fight. And yet they were leaders like Chris who were constantly reminding people that there have to be rules that we abide by. Not because the enemy doesn't abide by them, but because if we don't abide by them, then we are not better than the enemy and we don't have a moral right to win.

And so I, I think you're, you're nailing it.

CHRIS: Tristan, um, a question or an area to explore sort of close to where you grew up professionally. Like th the, the role of Silicon Valley and the tech sector. Um, and to frame it up a bit, um, I went back and, uh, know few folks, leaders at, uh, HP. Great, great company, you know, the legacy organization in the Valley.

Um, and David Packard said once, um, why are we here? I think many people assume wrongly that a company exists solely to make money. Money is an important part of the company's existence if the company is any good. But a result is not a cause. We must go deeper and find a real reason for our being. Um, and, and these were the core principles that, that, that sector was founded on.

And as you would know, that the relationship between that the technology sector and government was, was one of the reasons our country became what it was during the last 40, 50 years. Um, So, and, and when we look at other sectors, there's as examples throughout history, when something becomes hot for lack of a better term, it draws in a certain type of people, whether that was the financial sector in the, in the eighties, um, oil and gas has, has had its ups and downs, um, NASA, the space race, and you get certain things out of the North Star that, that, that, and it's not perfect, but they set this audacious goal and it attracts a certain type of person.

Has that goal shifted unrecoverably in or, or am I misreading as an, as an outsider? Is it, is it, does it still exist? And this is a distraction. What is the role of leaders in Silicon Valley right now?

TRISTAN HARRIS: Yeah, well, there's, there's so much in what you said. Um, you know, it's typically founders who are the ones who hold onto something as a goal other than, than money.

I mean, obviously they're ones who also are rewarded the most with the money, but they're the ones who typically have. A deeper sense of purpose, um, and have a capacity to do that. Typically at a later stage companies you bring in other CEOs, and then you're kind of in this operational mode. I think there's forgot Randy Komisar one of the famous venture capitalists talks about the sort of different stages of CEOs you get it at companies that operate with different, um, uh, priorities. Um, I think again, one of the challenges that we face is, is how do you uphold those values? If you'll be out competed by less values, aligned actors and you can win by doing so.

I firmly believe Stan, what you're saying that we have to get into a world. Um, you know, even if China's going to do the non climate change, protecting thing, the United States has to lead on climate change, regardless of whether they you know, um, will out-compete us in some short term sense because hopefully there's some invisible way in which doing the right thing, representing our values the right way will help drive the other change that we need across the rest of the ecosystem.

But I'll give you an example from the food industry, there's a great book called salt, sugar fat, and there's a famous meeting that they had. And I think the late 1990s, where they got all the food companies together and they had this conversation, they said, Are we causing the right, the, you know, surge in diabetes and obesity, and they had some of their food scientists present.

It's an uncomfortable conversation. Right. And I think you can make a parallel to that, to the tech industry. Basically, there was a kind of consensus that there was uh, uh, responsibility in, in the food industry. Um, but they couldn't get a kind of self regulatory sort of agreement between these companies.

So what are we going to do? Because if I don't use the salt, sugar, fat, the book is about these three magic ingredients, salt, sugar, fat. If I use them, my company starts winning. And if I use less of them, my company starts losing. Uh, and there was a famous example of a CEO who came in, I think in the year 2004, I think her name is Betsy Morgan or Betsy Mills or something from, I think it was from General Mills.

And as they put, they decided, Hey, we're going to put in, we're going to do the right thing. We're going to put in caps on the amount of salt, sugar, and fat that are used in our products. So yes, we can make more

money if we just serve your dial up the, the cheese, the salt and the Cheez-Its, but we're gonna put some caps in there.

What do they do? They put those caps in. It happened in a, in a certain moment during the financial history of the food sector, that the, their competitors started making more money. And because they put in these caps, they weren't making as much money. They had, they had a call with the, uh, the wall street analysts and they had to report on this and they said, I'm sorry.

You know, we put in these. These caps. They said, well, I'm sorry, we're going to have to kick you out. So they kicked out the CEO, they were, they kicked out the caps and they went back to business as usual. And until you had some kind of way in which there's this race condition, this multipolar trap where all, all of the food companies are abiding by some standards is, Hey, here's the limits on salt, sugar, fat we're all gonna use.

Well for the tech industry it might be something like dopamine, social validation and social performativity. Um, And, you know, if you use those three ingredients in various ways, you get different versions of Tik Tok, Instagram, Facebook, and there's this sort of famous saying by Reed Hoffman in the tech industry that, um, you know, all, all successful social media products tap into one or more of the seven deadly sins.

I think the seven deadly sins are the salt, sugar fat for, uh, you know, the tech industry, uh, what, uh, what salt, sugar fat is for the food industry. Um, so I say that because I think again, we have to. I say this, not because I want to be pessimistic. I just want to honor the multipolar traps that we're in.

And, um, and it's really a kind of conundrum. And I think, you know, one of your other points is how do we get government to kind of keep pace with the accelerating pace of technology? Because we're still talking about Facebook and Tik Tok and, and Instagram and things like that, but we're going to have brand new platforms, you know, a year or two years out from now, you know, we're still solving.

The, the misinformation and fake news problems of 2016. Uh, what do we do when the rate of technological evolution is, is exceeding some of the governance that we need from our, from our leaders and how do they keep pace with it? What is a system in which it is structurally keeping pace with it? Not just that we have to expect Congress members to read, you know, the, the most literature about every topic in the world.

Is that, is that realistic?

CHRIS: It's um, it's a great analogy. Yeah. I'll hand it over to Stan in a second, but the, um, the, the food industry transitions and there's, there's been, you know, a massive amount of research and, and great documenters there as well, sort of mapping out that transition. One of the problems that we're one of the places I get stuck as a non industry expert here is thinking in analogies, there are components to this that just don't exist in those other conversations.

Like the, the food industry leader wasn't dependent on that bag of unhealthy chips personally. Right. And in this world, they were leveraging the thing to get to the place where they can regulate it right. There, it's

really hard to find an analog to the depth of control that it's given, it's, that is wrapped inside of the problem itself.

So, um, yeah,

TRISTAN HARRIS: I think you're onto something really important here, which is that the technology, isn't just this thing that we use anymore, it is actually infused itself. I think of us as kind of a society with a brain implant. Like if you take a brain implant, you put it in a brain, an individual person, right.

Why do we have FDA requirements on that? Because you have rewired the way that that person is going to operate in the world. So even if you're just doing it a little bit, or you're, you're just changing something subtle about them, that would really matter. Well, we're no longer a democracy. We're more like a cyborg democracy.

We're a society with a brain implant. And like you said, food or salt, sugar, fat, or Cheez-Its, didn't infuse themselves into our political system and then rewrite all of our political norms. Whereas social media has infused itself as the information mediation layer. And moreover on a national security perspective, you know what?

We spend billions of dollars of the DHS and passport controls and you know, the Pentagon, you know, Russia trying to try to fly a plane in the physical United States, the physical brain, the physical, sorry, land of the country. We have billions of dollars to make sure that we protect against that. But once we have our society sort of brain implant, where we're now a virtual United States. Now Russia or China can fly an information plane in there. Right. And instead of being met by the passport controls or, you know, the DHS or the Pentagon, they're met by a white glove Facebook algorithm that says, yeah, exactly which zip code would you like to target? So they have infused themselves in our national security infrastructure. And again, they have to actually act with the responsibility of what they have infused that with.

But, but as you said at the very beginning of this call, there is no precedent. There's not like some philosophers we can turn to, or some political scientists we can turn to who say, well, we've actually thought about this 2000 year old question of what does it mean to mediate 3 billion people's thoughts?

And then how do you protect them from a multinational sort of sovereignty perspective and the national security apparatus and how do we organize all that? So it really is a new challenge of how do you infuse yourself into the global mind of all these different countries and, and, and respect, you know, again, what set of values, how do you, how do you put those dividing lines to do that well?

STAN: Wow. Um, I'm going to throw out a sensitive word right now, tribalism. And when you described the Russians coming in, suddenly you sort of described the United States as a tribe. We're all Americans, we're shoulder to shoulder, we're protecting each other. And of course, traditionally flag day, the 4th of July, we separated, we--

we celebrate our American identity, our American tribe, but, but increasingly inside the United States and other nations as well, the sub-tribes these, these smaller entities are reinforced sometimes created by technology. Other times, reinforced by them. You've talked a little bit about this, but where does this go?

We know the trend is producing more intensely focused tribes. Where's it taken us and what can we do about it?

TRISTAN HARRIS: Yeah, I'm so glad. Um, we're, we're, we're talking about this aspect because I actually think that tribalism and information tribalism, the fact that we are not able to see the same realities and tribalism interesting is interesting words to pair with information because tribalism is also about loyalty. And I think we have epistemic loyalty, epistemic, meaning for epitstemology. How do we know what we know? We have, we are not actually sincerely engaging in epistemology, truth, seeking, trying to figure out what is true, weighing different facts, weighing different sources, um, asking different questions.

We are actually loyal like a tribe to certain sources to certain biases. So if I already believe that masks don't work, I'm looking at. And clicking on things that show me that here's a couple of places where people made a couple of good points about why didn't masks work in that state, where they put the lockdown and the, you know, they put the regulation.

And then, so now I'm clicking on that. Now Facebook gives me this sort of reinforcement. So it's actually tribalism reinforcement where it says, well, here's even more articles where people were also talking about where mask didn't work, and then you wonder, well, why does half the country not think masks work?

Um, but it's true on both sides of this, by the way. And one of my favorite groups that does research on this is a, you may know them. It's called More In Common. It's run by a former, former military guy, I think, uh, and Dan Valone and, and what they measure is actually perception gaps, meaning this is not, um, what people believe, but it's what people believe about what the other side believes. They're called second order beliefs.

So how accurate can Democrats estimate Republican's beliefs and how accurately can Democrat from Republicans estimate Democrats believe? So a good example of this. If you ask Democrats to estimate, what percentage of Republicans make more than $250,000 a year? They'll say about a third of Republicans, more than a third of Republicans make $250,000 a year.

The actual number is 2%. Um, similarly, if you ask Republicans, uh, what percentage of Democrats are LGBTQ? And they'll also estimate about a third of Democrats are LGBTQ. The actual number is 6%. So perception gaps are basically how you know, we're not even, it's like we're, we're looking at a boxing match and you're you're boxing with this, this illusory villain.

 Like it's, we're not even actually talking to the people whose views we think we're talking to because social media has in this information tribalism, shown us the most extreme views because they get more attention. Now there's actually two counsel. This is a double whammy. So the first is that social media rewards asymmetric participation from people who have extreme views.

So the more extreme of view you have. The more often you're participating. What they found is the people who are participating in the most on social media are the ones who have more extreme views. So that's the first asymmetry asymmetry. Okay. The second one is that when you share a more extreme view

and more outrageous view, the more distribution it gets, the more reach it gets, the more surface area it gets in the attention economy.

Um, So, what we have is this exaggerated, negative and extreme perception of where everyone's views are. Uh, and then this creates this sort of vicious cycle. The way that they describe it is that the people with larger perception gaps are actually more likely to describe their opponents as hateful, ignorant, or bigoted.

Because again, we were seeing the most extreme version of their site. We don't even understand that we're sort of like, I can't even engage in a conversation with you, which then leads to this vicious cycle of, I have to make excuses for my own side. I believe I have to win at all costs because I believe I already know your position and it's already a crazy one.

And if I let you have an inch, I'm going to lose in this long-term culture war. So I'm going to drive maximum outrage. I'm going to keep playing the kind of culture, culture, tribalism. And I think that when you come to tribalism, Started with this. That's really, what's so dangerous about this. And I think that's what leads to January six.

A lot of people are thinking that January six was, Oh, we should blame social media somehow because it was the tool that they use to organize the event or the tool that they created. Some Facebook events to bring people there. I see January six, as a result of this 10 year long process. Where social media was providing these reinforcement mechanisms on what people were believing in various tribes.

When I look at January 6th, I don't even see one specific. I'm curious what you would say, what you both would say about this, because you know, is it one tribe, which is that the Trump tribe? I think you've got the oath keepers. I think you've got some militias. I think you've got some civil war, two people, you've got some honest Trump supporters and their grandma's coming saying, we believe, you know it, you have very different views.

And so even you have this micro tribalism. Where we're kind of confused about what's real and that's really the ultimate cost here is when we can't even agree on reality. And I think we can wake up from that. If we all realize that there's a reason we've lost this kind of common ground and that's actually one hope I have is the Social Dilemma is doing some interesting work in creating common ground about why and how we've lost common ground.

There's a shared place to stand a shared understanding about why we lost share and understanding. And from there you can say, okay, what can we do about that? But I'm really curious to hear both of your thoughts about,

CHRIS: well, we we've had a lot of conversations about, um, six January and the run-up and would agree with you.

I think speaking for Stan as well. Um, it it's, it's not the. It's not the platform. It's the, the, the driving forces behind it. And one of the scary things that was who you could see watching six January, uh, live on TV was, you know, in, in fighting even sophisticated terrorists networks. Um, and I learned this by

learning from really, uh, thoughtful intelligence specialist and senior leaders imagine sort of three, a Venn diagram of three circles.

And they're, they're only, uh, slightly overlapping. So the smallest circle is your extremists to Stan's point earlier, th th the folks that are going to get into that car bombing scenario, right? That's a serious life and death commitment. Obviously the next to that is the. The, the supporting network, you can, will be your, your safety lines will be your, uh, your, your secret funding agency will work with governments in a shadowy way.

And then the largest diagram, which is massive is sort of the passive support. I don't, I don't like them, but I get it. Right. And, um, uh, the language matters to me and, and the actions of strong powers matter to me. And I might write an occasional check to a nonprofit that I'm pretty sure it's going in that direction and I'm doing that because, um, I'm pretty frustrated right now.

And our, one of our goals was to keep those circles as separate from one another as possible. And they're very sophisticated ways. You can, you can do that once you understand it. What we saw on January 6th, where all those networks converse together.

And so there were, there was everything from absolute actors that are now being prosecuted, et cetera, to people I think that were there by wrapped into something escalated far beyond what they thought it was going to be and not justifying either way. But when you get, when you, when there's a power that pulls all those together in one place, now you're playing with a whole different level of, of, uh, of risk and danger.

Um, something we never saw in that, in that other I other fight. Um, so yeah, it's, it's, it's a really important point. Hey Stan anything to build on that?

STAN: No, it's fascinating. I'm just gonna ask on, uh, The technology side. Is there a technology that pulls us back from the edge? About 25 years ago, I read a book called the truth machine and it was a novel about a guy who invented it, an infallible lie detector that could watch somebody on TV or in person and tell if they were lying.

And so it basically made it impossible to lie, particularly for politicians and public people and it changed society. And then of course the backstory, there was a hack and a problem, but we now starting to get technology that can tells when somebody's being deceptive much greater than the traditional polygraph.

Does that work, or as Chris is saying, do people start to believe so much that that, that doesn't apply anymore?

TRISTAN HARRIS: Oh, man, we're asking such deep questions here. I mean, what, what I, what I'd love to get to is if we're going to become. You know, as a democracy, if we don't want to become China and China's kind of out competing us with sort of just top down models for this, we don't want that.

We want to have a bottom up system that respects individual views, individual opinions, diversity, uh, constructive diversity, um, you know, disagreement that actually gets us to new frontiers, evolutionary frontiers. That's actually how you out-compete. The other model is you have. Um, a faster evolutionary

landscape that is getting us to better and newer ideas that are, um, going to be better than the sort of top-down projection of a small set of ideas now.

But to do that, we're going to need a whole culture. Of grounded agents that are each making sense of the world in, in careful ways and are not sharing information when they themselves don't know about it. I mean, if you think that's the beginning of COVID, you have a lot of people sharing certainty that this is, has to do with 5g or Bill Gates.

And I know that's a straw man and there's people who actually had other reasons to sort of believe different things about where it came from, but the people sharing that information, many of them couldn't even tell you the difference between a virus and a bacteria. If you can't go through that gate where you actually know some basic qualifying knowledge.

You know, I think we should be really thoughtful about how so people can share notes. So not that we want to be able to restrict people from sharing. You can share once you can demonstrate that knowledge about that thing. But if you're going to be sharing consequential information to large audiences, because one of the things that social media does is it means that we're all kind of walking BBC broadcast stations.

Like if you think about a teenager and Instagram, right. And they've got something like a million. Know, followers or subscribers on either Instagram or YouTube or something, a million people following them. You think about like TV stations back in the day, if you're going to reach a million people, we had broadcast requirements about what you had to do, what you didn't have to do.

We don't have that. We have decentralized. The exponential broadcasting capacities that used to be reserved for either main, you know, large publishers or large broadcasting stations. And we don't have some easy model. We can port over to this new thing because you know, we'd have to figure it out. I mean, in the film, the Social Dilemma we'll use the example of Saturday morning cartoons for kids.

So I grew up, you know, Saturday morning I talked to the former FCC commissioner, Michael Powell about this, you know, there's time, manner, and place restrictions. You literally could not even put a URL, a web address. Inside of a television advertisement between I think 8:00 AM and 11:00 AM or something on Saturday morning.

So if there was an ad to a TV show for kids, you couldn't even put a web address in it. You compare that to all the kids that are sitting there in front of YouTube now. And, and literally it's the opposite. They're they're maximally putting the web addresses and pushing you, not just. Saying here's a link and you can write it down and scribble it down, but here's literally the button that's going to drive you to more videos.

So I guess what I'm trying to bring up here is what, what are the standards and guard rails, this sort of new standards and practices for a digital information system and what are the principles that we were using before that we might be able to reapply now, but it's going to be again, brand new a distinction.

But I think that the key thing is we, we decoupled power from responsibility typically, and you know, this way better than I do. If I go to, you know, Uh, because in the military that, you know, you're granted these increasing powers, but you also have to demonstrate, I'm guessing different kinds of competences, you know, responsibilities, expertise, experience, and we have decoupled those things.

So now a 15 year old again, can be broadcasting their random views about the coronavirus or masks or, uh, you know, the vaccines or anything. And they're reaching and influencing large numbers of people without any of that responsibility. And, uh, so there's just, what I wonder about is just what are the terms and.

And standards and practices that lead to a grounded epistemic society, where our democracy, we have, you know, wiser, intelligent agents that are making sense of the world, wiser kids that are feeling uplifted in their internal security and not feeling the kind of social anxiety that comes from this, this environment.

I think that's what we have to get to with humane technology. So a world where our democracy is stronger and not weaker, especially in the face of competitive threats from abroad.

CHRIS: Tristan, um, the, as a, as a final question, and I'm not gonna, we'll push people towards the, what you put on your, your, what your group is doing and your website.

And so they can get a sense of your recommendations that are out there. Um, Which is a whole nother discussion, obviously, but broadly a high-level question. I would love to get your thoughts, Stan and I teach a leadership seminar together, and we're always challenging with the students. We go through case studies, we learn about a great leader in history, and then we just pick them apart.

You know, what, what should they have done differently? Um, when-- let's assume we don't destroy ourselves as a result of this chapter. In 50 years, 75 years, you know, after I'm long gone, whenever that is how are leader's going to look back and, and talk about this window. What's the case study lesson that we're hopefully learning and starting to put into action.

TRISTAN HARRIS: That's a, that's a really great question. Um, You know, when you look at this stuff, it can look kind of hopeless and I can understand why people might, uh, might feel that way, but actually in trying to figure out what works, what, what have been moments in history, where we have made huge transitions. Um, and there's, there's a few examples of this, uh, Rachel Carson's silent spring birthing the environmental movement, right.

You know, this, uh, one book which took years to get recognized and then leading to, um, you know, among other sort of activists and other. You know, moments along the way, but leading to in the Nixon administration, all of these indifferent environmental reforms, we actually recognize the environment. We studied DDT, which we used to just spray all over everything.

 Lead, we used to put into everything. Um, I think that we're looking at a situation like that. We're going to look back and say, um, much deeper than lead. We put something into, again, the kind of global brain implant of society. We realized the way that it was damaging. Luckily by enough people simply recognizing how degrading the impact was.

We could not just magically unplug and not use social media, but we could rapidly gain a kind of, um, you know, awareness that says, this is what we need to do to change it. And I'm hoping the Social Dilemma, which by the way, the film has reached 130 million people at about 190 countries in 30 languages, which gives me some real hope that at least as a foundation of public support that we can use to leverage.

And that looking back in history was the first two years of a Biden administration, where they had, you know, both sides of a Congress. Where they could actually get something meaningful, meaningful, done. So I, I look back at that. I look at Ralph Nader with Unsafe at Any Speed. We essentially have a bunch of, you know, previously we had unsafe cars without seatbelts.

We kind of have unsafe social media, dangerous social media. This is not an anti-technology conversation. I'm the opposite. I'm actually a technologist. I grew up. I worked at Apple as a kid. I, you know, I, I believe, I still believe in the optimism of technology. What we're doing now is a great example of perfectly humane technology.

I think we can get there if we actually, um, examine and notice the business models that are effectively the DDT business models for the world, uh, the DDT for the mind. And I think that we can get there. Uh, it's going to take a very significant, uh, transformation and it's really a question of, are we willing to make that.

That change in sacrifice. And I think this really is an epoch change in terms of where we are, but, uh, you know, w we wouldn't be doing this. And, and if we didn't think that, that we, we, uh, we could do it. And like I said, at the end of the film, it's, it's hard to believe that we will, but we simply have to.

And I I'm, I'm astonished how much change has actually happened in the last couple of years. When for years we thought this would never move. I mean, I'm working on this for eight years. And for five, six years, we just felt like nothing's happening here. Nothing seems to be changing. And, uh, it's, it's actually incredibly inspiring when you have members of Congress speaking about it, the former co-founder of Facebook saying, we need to break up Facebook.

This is not just about one company. This is about a business model. I think we can get there if we put our heads to it.

STAN: Yeah. I, I think you're right. It's interesting you brought up lead paint because I watched a TV show the other day historical one, and, uh, it was about lead pipes in Rome. And it talked about.

With every good intention, they use led pipes to bring water and it had quite an effect on a part of the population. It's sort of like what you're talking about here. Something that is convenient and seductive and, and in some ways can be very good, has become very, very damaging.

TRISTAN HARRIS: It's just, it's just like the chemical.

It's just like what you're saying with like the chemicals industry was this marvelous thing. We were inventing whole new material science, whole new chemicals that gave us all these remarkable new capacities, new efficiencies.

It's not like we said, we wanted to poison everybody or, you know, drop their IQs, which by the way, my understanding of the history of lead is one of the ways that we decided to regulate it is there was a study done on kids IQs that, that for everywhere there is high concentrations of lead in the atmosphere and those, those populations, uh, IQ points of kids dropped by four points and they later linked that to wage earning potentials of the children.

If you think of IQ, not as intelligence, but as a problem solving capacity, which is I believe how they sort of define it in the literature as a ability to navigate problems. I think we have a societal IQ, which is a societal problem solving capacity. And if the threshold for regulation or at least putting in some guardrails, was four points dropping for, for lead, I think we're far beyond those four points when it comes to social media dropping our societal IQ.

Because if we can't agree on reality, we're certainly not going to get there. And I think that that's what gives me hope is we've already crossed the thresholds for what we know uh, were the, the preconditions for action in the past. And we can do that again. Now,

STAN: Chris always tells people I ate too many lead paint chips as a kid. And that's the excuse for me. Um, Tristan, let me tell you on behalf of Chris and I, how much we appreciate first you, your generous time today and your wisdom, but also what you're doing.

As you say it, it's not just important. It, it's not something that just should happen. It has to happen. It may not happen today or tomorrow, but it has to happen. You just hope it happens before too much more damage is done.

TRISTAN HARRIS: Thank you so much to both of you. It's an honor speaking and I hope it's the beginning of some, some more conversations because, uh, uh, the rabbit hole goes very deep with, with how these issues need to get transformed, but it's really an honor to be with you and it really enjoyed the conversation.

Thank you. Thank you so much.

STAN: Thank you again, Tristan. Take care.

CHRIS: Okay. That was, um, that was a pretty intense discussion, uh, that, that will stick with me for a long time. Uh, Tristan was, uh, A brilliant guy, very thoughtful in his responses. But you know, as, as a father of a, twelve-year-old a ten-year-old yourself with grandchildren, um, I will not forget him saying that we are like a society with a brain implant for a long time.

And I think that is more on the nose and to the point of what we're missing in this discussion than anything I've heard from it, from anyone else. Yeah,

STAN: Chris, you're going to have to come see me at the house because I'm going to be smashing my phone and my computer right after this to get, get the implant away.

Cause it's scary. I mean, the first thing I thought of when we set up the conversation was we're going to talk about the proud boys and the oath keepers in January 6th and what misinformation is doing to our society really large. And that is disturbing. It is because very well, uh, resource sophisticated powers that be, uh, like Russia, China, and other, and others can do influence campaigns that change how we think, and then what we do.

CHRIS: Yeah. It's that, it's the point he was making. I mean, you can see so many sides to this and I, I believe him. When he says, and, and the others that were interviewed and Social Dilemma that are really

trying to drive this conversation that, you know, like the light button was just meant to be fun. And it turns into this horrific thing for young kids to define their, their value by the number of thumbs up from people that never dull, never meet.

Um, so in a whole series of other things that flow underneath that, um, but it is the, the. Reality that this is rewiring, how brains work that I hadn't thought about it in that way, in that depth until he was bringing that up and, and mapping it over to other large changes, regulatory changes that'll have to come into play.

Right? We, we have to regulate what goes the FDA is based on this. What goes into food and drugs? Cause it's unhealthy. I've done wrong. And there has to be some sort of system level change. If we're going to get ahead of this.

STAN: I mean, this seems so powerful, our class at Yale, and we get people in their late teens up to their early thirties and you see that they're already a very generation or very different from our generation, but they're also very different from the generations younger than them.

You know, it's, the power seems to be snowballing. And so it, it becomes more disturbing.

CHRIS: Yeah, it's interesting. I know for us in, just in our professional space, like in our firm, we have people from, you know, sixties down to early professionals in their twenties. For me talking to our younger professionals who are just a few years out of college saying, Oh, I don't understand how my younger siblings who were in high school think about technology, like it's a six year difference and it's, it's, it's changing that rapidly.

Uh, I don't have any corollary like that from, from growing up. Um, I do think we are going to, um, and his view on like, what would this be looked like? It looked like in hindsight was interesting. Um, I hope I live long enough to read the case studies about how this looks 50 years from now.

Um, cause I don't think we're getting it right yet. Um, The par part of it, the idea of the rewiring. And I'm just curious from sort of a leadership lens, he mentioned there, like you can't pay attention as long. You can't do these. These are the things that are being affected. Um, we didn't talk about this with Tristan, but.

I know you still read in long form, like you, you, you're very intentional about, uh, reading in the evenings. Um, I try to keep that in my, uh, skillset sitting down and reading for 45 minutes, um, which I think is coming at, it's one of the costs of this, that level of concentration um, doesn't exist with people. I think uh, there that are getting rewired in their, their attention span.

STAN: I think that's true. Even look at the change in movies. Now, scenes are shorter. Action goes faster. It's choppier. And I do think at least from my case, the ability to sit down, take a deep breath for 45 minutes or more, not for two minutes and read something and think-- I start to get on a different level of thinking and a rhythm of doing it.

And, and I think that's important and I'm not saying our generations are better than other generations, but I don't think we yet understand the full impact of what the technology is doing. And if we need an intervention, how do you do that? You know, how do you, you really, so many things now are essential just to get basics done.

You know, if, if your kid doesn't have a smartphone. They can't Uber, if you need them to Uber. I mean, they're just, how, how do we do that?

CHRIS: Well, yeah. And it's easy to, it's easy as a parent to say, Oh, this is terrible. But if you think about the last year through the pandemic, take away that technology and what are the, what are the horrible effects?

I mean, we've got amazing ability to supply people remotely with basic essentials to educate kids. Although the disparities there are pretty significant. Um, so it's not all evil, obviously. Um, there, there are lots of upsides, um, but there is, and it's interesting, especially someone like Tristan to, to say some of the most negative impacts started in the most lighthearted way.

Right. It wasn't these evil actors. It was just, Oh yeah, let's like increase ad revenue by doing X and how we put banners up and suddenly it's rewiring people's brains. Yeah.

STAN: Well, I think codeine started curing headaches and, uh, it's probably had some issues since then.

CHRIS: Yeah, that's right. Um, well, endlessly interesting.

Um, and yeah. Again, we don't necessarily plug stuff on this podcast, but for those that haven't seen Social Dilemma or familiar with the work that Tristan and his group are doing, you know, it's a Google search away, definitely worth the time. Um, this is something that, um, we all need to be focused on and interested in because it really is having societal level effects on how we, how we see the truth, how we receive information, how we process stuff.

Um, so we really appreciate Tristan and his team for taking the time.

STAN: Yeah. And I tell you, I, I think we're both smarter for the experience.

CHRIS: Couldn't agree more. All right. Thanks everyone. We'll see you next time here.