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## Why is the World Going to Hell?



Still from The Social Dilemma. (Sundance Institute.)

If you're wondering what the hell is going on right now – the “Why is the world turning to shit?” thought – you may find Netflix's new documentary *The Social Dilemma* a good starting point for clarifying your thinking. I say “starting point” because, as we shall see, the film suffers from two major limitations: one in its analysis and the other in its conclusion. Nonetheless, the film is good at exploring the contours of the major social crises we currently face – epitomised both by our addiction to the mobile phone and by its ability to rewire our consciousness and our personalities.

The film makes a convincing case that this is not simply an example of old wine in new bottles. This isn't the Generation Z equivalent of parents telling their children to stop watching so much TV and play outside. Social media is not simply a more sophisticated platform for Edward Bernays-inspired advertising. It is a new kind of assault on who we are, not just what we think.

According to The Social Dilemma, we are fast reaching a kind of human “event horizon”, with our societies standing on the brink of collapse. We face what several interviewees term an “existential threat” from the way the internet, and particularly social media, are rapidly developing.

I don’t think they are being alarmist. Or rather I think they are right to be alarmist, even if their alarm is not entirely for the right reasons. We will get to the limitations in their thinking in a moment.

Like many documentaries of this kind, The Social Dilemma is deeply tied to the shared perspective of its many participants. In most cases, they are richly disillusioned, former executives and senior software engineers from Silicon Valley. They understand that their once-cherished creations – Google, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Instagram, Snapchat (WhatsApp seems strangely under-represented in the roll call) – have turned into a gallery of Frankenstein’s monsters.

That is typified in the plaintive story of the guy who helped invent the “Like” button for Facebook. He thought his creation would flood the world with the warm glow of brother and sisterhood, spreading love like a Coca Cola advert. In fact, it ended up inflaming our insecurities and need for social approval, and dramatically pushed up rates of suicide among teenage girls.

If the number of watches of the documentary is any measure, disillusion with social media is spreading far beyond its inventors.

### **Children as guinea pigs**

Although not flagged as such, The Social Dilemma divides into three chapters.

The first, dealing with the argument we are already most familiar with, is that social media is a global experiment in altering our psychology and social interactions, and our children are the main guinea pigs. Millennials (those who came of age in the 2000s) are the first generation that spent their formative years with Facebook and MySpace as best friends. Their successors, Generation Z, barely know a world without social media at its forefront.

The film makes a relatively easy case forcefully: that our children are not only addicted to their shiny phones and what lies inside the packaging, but that their minds are being aggressively rewired to hold their attention and then make them pliable for corporations to sell things.

Each child is not just locked in a solitary battle to stay in control of his or her mind against the skills of hundreds of the world’s greatest software engineers. The fight to change their perspective and ours – the sense of who we are – is now in the hands of algorithms that are refined every second of every day by AI, artificial intelligence. As one interviewee observes, social media is not going to become *less* expert at manipulating our thinking and emotions, it’s going to keep getting much, much better at doing it.

Jaron Lanier, one of the computing pioneers of virtual reality, explains what Google and the rest of these digital corporations are really selling: “It’s the gradual, slight, imperceptible change in your own behaviour and perception – *that* is the product.” That is also how these corporations make their money, by “changing what you do, what you think, who you are.”

They make profits, big profits, from the predictions business – predicting what you will think and how you will behave so that you are more easily persuaded to buy what their advertisers want to sell you. To have great predictions, these corporations have had to amass vast quantities of data on each of us – what is sometimes called “surveillance capitalism”.

And, though the film does not quite spell it out, there is another implication. The best formula for tech giants to maximise their predictions is this: as well as processing lots of data on us, they must gradually grind down our distinctiveness, our individuality, our eccentricities so that we become a series of archetypes. Then, our emotions – our fears, insecurities, desires, cravings – can be more easily gauged, exploited and plundered by advertisers.

These new corporations trade in human futures, just as other corporations have long traded in oil futures and pork-belly futures, notes Shoshana Zuboff, professor emeritus at Harvard business school. Those markets “have made the internet companies the richest companies in the history of humanity”.

### **Flat Earthers and Pizzagate**

The second chapter explains that, as we get herded into our echo chambers of self-reinforcing information, we lose more and more sense of the real world and of each other. With it, our ability to empathise and compromise is eroded. We live in different information universes, chosen for us by algorithms whose only criterion is how to maximise our attention for advertisers’ products to generate greater profits for the internet giants.

Anyone who has spent any time on social media, especially a combative platform like Twitter, will sense that there is a truth to this claim. Social cohesion, empathy, fair play, morality are not in the algorithm. Our separate information universes mean we are increasingly prone to misunderstanding and confrontation.

And there is a further problem, as one interviewee states: “The truth is boring.” Simple or fanciful ideas are easier to grasp and more fun. People prefer to share what’s exciting, what’s novel, what’s unexpected, what’s shocking. “It’s a disinformation-for-profit model,” as another interviewee observes, stating that research shows false information is six times more likely to spread on social media platforms than true information.

And as governments and politicians work more closely with these tech companies – a well-documented fact the film entirely fails to explore – our rulers are better positioned than ever to manipulate our thinking and control what we do. They can dictate the political discourse more quickly, more comprehensively, more cheaply than ever before.

This section of the film, however, is the least successful. True, our societies are riven by increasing polarisation and conflict, and feel more tribal. But the film implies that all forms

of social tension – from the paranoid paedophile conspiracy theory of Pizzagate to the Black Lives Matter protests – are the result of social media’s harmful influence.

And though it is easy to know that Flat Earthers are spreading misinformation, it is far harder to be sure what is true and what is false in many others areas of life. Recent history suggests our yardsticks cannot be simply what governments say is true – or Mark Zuckerberg, or even “experts”. It may be a while since doctors were telling us that cigarettes were safe, but millions of Americans were told only a few years ago that opiates would help them – until an opiate addiction crisis erupted across the US.

This section falls into making a category error of the kind set out by one of the interviewees early in the film. Despite all the drawbacks, the internet and social media have an undoubted upside when used simply as a tool, argues Tristan Harris, Google’s former design ethicist and the soul of the film. He gives the example of being able to hail a cab almost instantly at the press of a phone button. That, of course, highlights something about the materialist priorities of most of Silicon Valley’s leading lights.

But the tool box nestled in our phones, full of apps, does not just satisfy our craving for material comfort and security. It has also fuelled a craving to understand the world and our place in it, and offered tools to help us do that.

Phones have made it possible for ordinary people to film and share scenes once witnessed by only a handful of disbelieved passers-by. We can all see for ourselves a white police officer dispassionately kneeling on the neck of a black man for nine minutes, while the victim cries out he cannot breathe, until he expires. And we can then judge the values and priorities of our leaders when they decide to do as little as possible to prevent such incidents occurring again.

The internet has created a platform from which not only disillusioned former Silicon Valley execs can blow the whistle on what the Mark Zuckerbergs are up to, but so can a US army private like Chelsea Manning, by exposing war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, and so can a national security tech insider like Edward Snowden, by revealing the way we are being secretly surveilled by our own governments.

Technological digital breakthroughs allowed someone like Julian Assange to set up a site, Wikileaks, that offered us a window on the *real* political world – a window through we could see our leaders behaving more like psychopaths than humanitarians. A window those same leaders are now fighting tooth and nail to close by putting him on trial.

### **A small window on reality**

The Social Dilemma ignores all of this to focus on the dangers of so-called “fake news”. It dramatises a scene suggesting that only those sucked into information blackholes and conspiracy sites end up taking to the street to protest – and when they do, the film hints, it will not end well for them.

Apps allowing us to hail a taxi or navigate our way to a destination are undoubtedly useful tools. But being able to find out what our leaders are really doing – whether they are

committing crimes against others or against us – is an even more useful tool. In fact, it is a vital one if we want to stop the kind of self-destructive behaviours The Social Dilemma is concerned about, not least our destruction of the planet's life systems (an issue that, except for one interviewee's final comment, the film leaves untouched).

Use of social media does not mean one necessarily loses touch with the real world. For a minority, social media has deepened their understanding of reality. For those tired of having the real world mediated for them by a bunch of billionaires and traditional media corporations, the chaotic social media platforms have provided an opportunity to gain insights into a reality that was obscured before.

The paradox, of course, is that these new social media corporations are no less billionaire-owned, no less power-hungry, no less manipulative than the old media corporations. The AI algorithms they are rapidly refining are being used – under the rubric of “fake news” – to drive out this new marketplace in whistleblowing, in citizen journalism, in dissident ideas.

Social media corporations are quickly getting better at distinguishing the baby from the bathwater, so they can throw out the baby. After all, like their forebears, the new media platforms are in the business of business, not of waking us up to the fact that they are embedded in a corporate world that has plundered the planet for profit.

Much of our current social polarisation and conflict is not, as The Social Dilemma suggests, between those influenced by social media's “fake news” and those influenced by corporate media's “real news”. It is between, on the one hand, those who have managed to find oases of critical thinking and transparency in the new media and, on the other, those trapped in the old media model or those who, unable to think critically after a lifetime of consuming corporate media, have been easily and profitably sucked into nihilistic, online conspiracies.

### **Our mental black boxes**

The third chapter gets to the nub of the problem without indicating exactly what that nub is. That is because The Social Dilemma cannot properly draw from its already faulty premises the necessary conclusion to indict a system in which the Netflix corporation that funded the documentary and is televising it is so deeply embedded itself.

For all its heart-on-its-sleeve anxieties about the “existential threat” we face as a species, The Social Dilemma is strangely quiet about what needs to change – aside from limiting our kids' exposure to Youtube and Facebook. It is a deflating ending to the rollercoaster ride that preceded it.

Here I want to backtrack a little. The film's first chapter makes it sound as though social media's rewiring of our brains to sell us advertising is something *entirely* new. The second chapter treats our society's growing loss of empathy, and the rapid rise in an individualistic narcissism, as something *entirely* new. But very obviously neither proposition is true.

Advertisers have been playing with our brains in sophisticated ways for at least a century. And social atomisation – individualism, selfishness and consumerism – have been a feature

of western life for at least as long. These aren't new phenomena. It's just that these long-term, negative aspects of western society are growing exponentially, at a seemingly unstoppable rate.

We've been heading towards dystopia for decades, as should be obvious to anyone who has been tracking the lack of political urgency to deal with climate change since the problem became obvious to scientists back in the 1970s.

The multiple ways in which we are damaging the planet – destroying forests and natural habitats, pushing species towards extinction, polluting the air and water, melting the ice-caps, generating a climate crisis – have been increasingly evident since our societies turned everything into a commodity that could be bought and sold in the marketplace. We began on the slippery slope towards the problems highlighted by *The Social Dilemma* the moment we collectively decided that nothing was sacred, that nothing was more sacrosanct than our desire to turn a quick buck.

It is true that social media is pushing us towards an event horizon. But then so is climate change, and so is our unsustainable global economy, premised on infinite growth on a finite planet. And, more importantly, these profound crises are all arising *at the same time*.

There *is* a conspiracy, but not of the Pizzagate variety. It is an ideological conspiracy, of at least two centuries' duration, by a tiny and ever more fabulously wealthy elite to further enrich themselves and to maintain their power, their dominance, at all costs.

There is a reason why, as Harvard business professor Shoshana Zuboff points out, social media corporations are the most fantastically wealthy in human history. And that reason is also why we are reaching the human "event horizon" these Silicon Valley luminaries all fear, one where our societies, our economies, the planet's life-support systems are all on the brink of collapse *together*.

The cause of that full-spectrum, systemic crisis is not named, but it has a name. Its name is the ideology that has become a black box, a mental prison, in which we have become incapable of imagining any other way of organising our lives, any other future than the one we are destined for at the moment. That ideology's name is capitalism.

### **Waking up from the matrix**

Social media and the AI behind it are one of the multiple crises we can no longer ignore as capitalism reaches the end of a trajectory it has long been on. The seeds of neoliberalism's current, all-too-obvious destructive nature were planted long ago, when the "civilised", industrialised west decided its mission was to conquer and subdue the natural world, when it embraced an ideology that fetishised money and turned people into objects to be exploited.

A few of the participants in *The Social Dilemma* allude to this in the last moments of the final chapter. The difficulty they have in expressing the full significance of the conclusions they have drawn from two decades spent in the most predatory corporations the world has ever known could be because their minds are still black boxes, preventing them from standing

outside the ideological system they, like us, were born into. Or it could be because coded language is the best one can manage if a corporate platform like Netflix is going to let a film like this one reach a mass audience.

Tristan Harris tries to articulate the difficulty by grasping for a movie allusion: “How do you wake up from the matrix when you don’t know you’re in the matrix?” Later, he observes: “What I see is a bunch of people who are trapped by a business model, an economic incentive, shareholder pressure that makes it almost impossible to do something else.”

Although still framed in Harris’s mind as a specific critique of social media corporations, this point is very obviously true of all corporations, and of the ideological system – capitalism – that empowers all these corporations.

Another interviewee notes: “I don’t think these guys [the tech giants] set out to be evil, it’s just the business model.”

He is right. But “evilness” – the psychopathic pursuit of profit above all other values – is the business model for all corporations, not just the digital ones.

The one interviewee who manages, or is allowed, to connect the dots is Justin Rosenstein, a former engineer for Twitter and Google. He eloquently observes:

“We live in a world in which a tree is worth more, financially, dead than alive. A world in which a whale is worth more dead than alive. For so long as our economy works in that way, and corporations go unregulated, they’re going to continue to destroy trees, to kill whales, to mine the earth, and to continue to pull oil out of the ground, even though we know it is destroying the planet and we know it is going to leave a worse world for future generations.

“This is short-term thinking based on this religion of profit at all costs. As if somehow, magically, each corporation acting in its selfish interest is going to produce the best result. ... What’s frightening – and what hopefully is the last straw and will make us wake up as a civilisation as to how flawed this theory is in the first place – is to see that now *we* are the tree, *we* are the whale. Our attention can be mined. We are more profitable to a corporation if we’re spending time staring at a screen, staring at an ad, than if we’re spending our time living our life in a rich way.”

Here is the problem condensed. That unnamed “flawed theory” is capitalism. The interviewees in the film arrived at their alarming conclusion – that we are on the brink of social collapse, facing an “existential threat” – because they have worked inside the bellies of the biggest corporate beasts on the planet, like Google and Facebook.

These experiences have provided most of these Silicon Valley experts with deep, but only partial, insight. While most of us view Facebook and Youtube as little more than places to exchange news with friends or share a video, these insiders understand much more. They have seen up close the most powerful, most predatory, most all-devouring corporations in human history.

Nonetheless, most of them have mistakenly assumed that their experiences of their own corporate sector apply only to their corporate sector. They understand the “existential threat” posed by Facebook and Google without extrapolating to the identical existential threats posed by Amazon, Exxon, Lockheed Martin, Halliburton, Goldman Sachs and thousands more giant, soulless corporations.

The Social Dilemma offers us an opportunity to sense the ugly, psychopathic face shielding behind the mask of social media’s affability. But for those watching carefully the film offers more: a chance to grasp the pathology of the system itself that pushed these destructive social media giants into our lives.

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