URL: https://ecorner.stanford.edu/in-brief/escaping-the-echo-chamber/

Technology-design ethicist Tristan Harris explains how Facebook and other social-media platforms that use algorithms to keep users engaged endanger society by eroding our shared sense of reality and presenting people just what they want to see. "The thing that's best at capturing a human being's attention," Harris says, "is going to be to show them an individual reality that confirms their world view."

Transcript

is I interviewed all sorts of people who were like the best experts in the field on persuasion and behavioral economics and magicians and you know I had lunch with, years ago when I started working on this with Danny Kahneman who was actually one of the founders of the field of behavioral economics.. He's the Nobel prize winner in behavioral economics which is how we can kind of fool people.. And in his book Thinking Fast and Slow he says look even though I know how all these techniques work and how these cognitive biases work it still works on me.. Now the important part to realize is okay if you told someone I'm going to give you access to know what your DNA looks like then you don't think well now I can change my hair color from red to something else, right.. So I think the challenge is that we really are inside of this experience.. We're really inside of cognitive biases.. If I did that Africa number of countries thing and I anchor you on one number versus another number whether you want to or not there's all of these invisible influences that are guiding us and so the question becomes what, how do you ethically use those forces and then again for good and for what values.. In terms of being concrete what do you do, you can turn off all notifications on your phone except for when a person wants your attention.. So one of the big things in the industry is just about everything that's a notification that comes at you is actually generated by a machine and the machine's goal is usually like what will get your attention right now.. And so it's automatedly sending you stuff..

Have any of you ever tried the following, you don't use Facebook for like a week and then you watch and suddenly they send you like 3,000 emails.. It's like a drug dealer who wants you to come back.. (laughing) So, I'm not trying to be, I hope when I say this I don't sound like I'm just trying to be against something.. It's more that there's this model that's just not aligned with all of us, right.. I don't think anyone wants a world where this is going.. That's hopefully what I communicated.. Like this is so dangerous where we're headed.. And I want to say one more thing about danger that I didn't mention.. I think the deepest existential risk from this is that the thing that's best at capturing a human being's attention, a single person's attention, is going to be show them an individual reality that confirms their world views.. That's going to be so different from the thing that would confirm our shared sense of reality..

So you can think of Facebook innocually.. Like you give it this innocuous naive goal of like let's help people, let's engage people the most and then that thing is taking entire societies and putting them through a paper shredder where out the other end you get basically filter bubbles and echo chambers where people don't have shared facts and agree on the same reality.. That's like I think the deepest part of this problem.. So if you weren't convinced by the kid's threat or the national security side I think that is the sort of step one for good society...