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Tristan Harris, co-founder of a nonprofit movement calling on the tech industry to design products more ethically, talks about the challenge of getting companies to acknowledge that what they provide to users doesn't always have a meaningful impact — but often just distracts or entertains them. Quoting the writer Upton Sinclair, Harris says "You can't ask someone to question what their salary depends on."



Transcript

- Upton Sinclair, the writer, wrote that you can't ask someone to question the thing that their salary depends on.. It's even harder to get someone to question something that they deeply believe is their purpose.. Think about questioning someone's religion, or something like that, or questioning someone's identity.. And the reason I'm talking about this is because all of us in this room, I imagine, have good intentions for where we want the world to go, and what it means to value certain things that we care about.. But we're only as good as the way that we can self-examine our own values.. So here I was at Google, and I was kind of recovering as an entrepreneur, I felt, honestly, like I had failed, I had, I needed to get psychotherapy, I went to Burning Man, I had to kind of let go of, you know, the life that I was living, and realizing that there was more to life than just starting companies, right? And I still had all these friends that started companies.. And then I was sitting at Google, and I had actually joined the Gmail team, and working on some future-looking personal assistance-type projects.. And I was working with Gmail, and I was in the room with the people who make this product, I was fascinated.. You know, here's this Gmail product that, literally, I don't know, a billion people actively use.. And, you know, that hundreds of millions of knowledge workers, that's the window, it might be open on some of your laptop screens right now for all I know, right? People live in this product, and it has this extraordinary influence on the thoughts that arrive in people's heads, right? Like, just, you're sitting there, if an email comes in right now, it's gonna push thoughts into your mind..

And you don't get to choose whether that happens, it just happens.. And so I was sitting in this room, you know, thinking about, I really cared about products that really delivered a positive benefit in the world, and I was in the room with the people who would be thinking the most deeply about what it would mean to truly benefit people's lives, what email should do, like, what are the values behind email? Like, of all rooms to be in in the world, to be in that design room is, like, that's the room.. And I was, I don't wanna say disappointed, but the way that the conversations were had were about, "Let's make it really fun to use, "let's make it engaging.. "What if we make it bounce up when you scroll? "What if it expands vertically, "instead of slides horizontally?" And there was all these design questions like that, and I felt that there was something missing, I couldn't put my finger on it for awhile, but I realized later, it's like, when is email actually adding up to a real net-positive difference in your life? Think about the emails that you send, whether it's love letters, or apartment searches, where you're actually getting some real, actual delivered life change, a real benefit, a real value, and then think of all the other stuff, that we're just kind of shuffling messages back and forth.. And I felt like, of all rooms to be asking this question, we were not asking the biggest question.. And after a year at Google, I was kinda burnt out, and I decided that I was basically gonna leave, at least I thought I did.. And before I did, I kind of took these concerns, and I made a presentation.. And the presentation was, basically, never before in history have 50 designers in California, at three tech companies, influenced what two billion people will think and do, right now.. And we have an enormous responsibility, as a company that shapes this screen, in terms of what we are causing people to do.. And the reason I was even thinking about that is because I had this background as a magician, and then at the Persuasive Technology Lab, where I learned that minds really are steered by forces that they don't see..

So I have to say that in making this presentation, I actually thought I was gonna get fired.. It was not alarmist, or angry, or upset, but it was very critical, and it was very existential.. Like, what does it mean for, actually, email to be a benefit to people's lives? And I was surprised, 'cause I sent it to about 10 people, and when I came into work the next morning, I got some emails back, and I clicked on their comments, and I went to the presentation, Google Presentations, it showed the number of simultaneous viewers was 150.. And when I, I clicked on it later that day, there was 450 simultaneous viewers..

And, basically, I saw that it had spread virally around the entire company.. It went all the way up to Larry Page, he was in three different meetings that day where people brought it to his attention.. And, suddenly, I was in this moment where I felt like, you know, the whole company was woken up to this question of, "Are we actually influencing the world in a positive way?" And that led me to the next three years, actually, an executive at Google saw this, and, basically, generously offered to host me in a little corner in his lab in New York, where I could study ethical design.. Which I basically self-titled this role of design ethicist, and this field, of what is ethical design, or ethical persuasion? What does it mean to ethically influence what two billion people are gonna be thinking and doing?..