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Tristan Harris, co-founder and co-director of Time Well Spent, demystifies the art of user engagement. Having been an amateur magician, a tech entrepreneur and now ethicist, Harris describes how the effectiveness of features that aim to hold our gaze or prompt certain beliefs lies in the asymmetry between the individual and the many engineers, designers and resources devoted to creating that feature.



## Transcript

- Okay, so the question was, if you take a persuasive technique, how would you apply an ethical framework for deploying it.. Okay, so let's take, I love this example.. So let's take Streaks and Snapchats sorry if you've heard me talk about this, but it's really important because if you didn't know Snapchats .... how many of the students here use Snapchats as your primary, okay, so a good number, okay.. It's obviously invented by a Stanford alum who has good intentions, but they use a speaker which is a technique, a persuasive design technique called Streaks.. If you are older in the audience, it shows the number of days in a row that you've sent a message back and forth with every contact.. So, why is that ethical or not? I want to actually hear what do you think? If I put the number of Streaks in a row, the number of days in a row, that two kids have sent a message back and forth what makes that, is that wrong, is that good, is that bad, what? - [Female] I kind of think of like from a utilitarian perspective it adds, it increases your quality of life and helps you feel more connected with your friends.. - Okay, so if it increases your quality of life, and helps you feel more connected with your friends and that would be one reason why we say it's good.. So let me tell you actually what the people at Snapchat, when they made this feature, what I've heard, through the grapevine, is the way that they justified this, was that unlike these other social apps that connect you to all of these friends all at once, you have all your relationships all at once, they help you focus on the relationships that really matter because they show you the depth of your friendships.. Do you see what I'm talking about? Again, you have a belief and a narrative and you're stepping inside of this belief you see through these rose color glasses with this is deepening friendships, according to the human being that believes those thoughts they're inside of a magic trick, and they believe that this is actually about deepening friendships..

And there's definitely evidence for that, I'm sure that there's someone, somewhere, two kids who feel like, man my friendship is way deeper because I can see the number of days in a row I've sent a message back and forth.. There's someone who's experienced that.. Just like there's magic moments on all these other applications.. But, there's still something that is not quite right about it, and I'll just jump to the chase.. With Snap Streaks there's first of all asymmetric situation, so the children don't know that there's like a thousand, or a hundred engineers on the other side of the screen and that they're deliberately choosing this technique against them.. So, that's one thing.. So there's an asymmetry between the knowledge that the persuaders have, and the knowledge the persuadee has.. Second one is that the I just had it, the goals of the persuader are different than the goals of the persuadee.. So when the people who make Snapchat do this, their actual goal is how can I hook you to use the product every day, because that works really well.. Like the Streaks feature is super addictive..

That's their goal and the goal of the person who's using it, usually the challenge of ethical persuasion is people don't know their own goals, so they actually just sit there and then the persuaders goal infects the persuadee, so now the persuadee is like the Matrix there's a drilled hole in the back and the goal went in of like now I need to keep up with these Streaks, and now they actually want that.. That's something they intuitively independently want.. That's successful advertising.. The persuaders goal has become the persuadee's goal, and now they define their friendship based on whether or not they're able to keep up their Streaks and if they don't have their Streak they're no longer best friends.. And by the way that's actually true.. So there are children walking around who think that their, their terms of their friendships are the Streaks that they have.. But I want to just do one more thing here, this is a great example, I'm so happy you asked me that, is .... you can do the same thing, a Streak feature on a meditation app.. Same feature now I'm putting on a meditation app the number of days in a row that you've meditated So, why is it feeling, intuitively it feels better there, right? So why is that, and I'll just say quickly

It's because, theoretically, the person who's trying to meditate actually cares, their goal is aligned with the persuaders goal.. They actually want to sort of mark off the number of days in a row that they've done the thing that they're yearning for..

Whereas, in the first case that's not true, so there's a whole field here we should write a six hundred page book about it, but that's a great question...