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Technology ethicist Tristan Harris explains that the human mind can be manipulated to see the world in a certain way, in the same way that magicians make illusions look real. He also discusses his earlier years as an entrepreneur and how, despite his altruistic intentions, the tech startup he founded ultimately depended on keeping users glued to their screens and his clients' content.



Transcript

- I want to tell you a little story about how I got into this and got concerned.. When I was a kid, I was a magician and I basically studied from a very early age that this instrument that you're seeing me through right now, your conscious experience can be manipulated.. There's limits to our attention, there are limits to what we can see and not see.. There's limits to how we can think about something.. If I split this room in half and said is the number of countries in Africa greater than 50 or less than 50? And I asked you that and I asked the other group is the number of countries in Africa greater than 150 or less than 150? Just by anchoring these two groups on different numbers, you would get different results.. And what you start to realize as a magician is that the human mind is living inside of a 24/7 magic trick.. You're basically inside of an instrument that you can't see that you're experiencing me right now and that there's certain levers and strings you can pull on to get people to think about things in a certain way.. I say this because this was childhood interest and I didn't really do it for that long.. I gave like, one or two magic shows, but it gave me the kind of foundations of that thinking and I want to explain that I later came to Stanford, I took the Mayfield Fellows classes, I got very interested in entrepreneurship and I started a small company called Apture, which was about learning and helping people learn things on the internet and we thought what if we could apply all that stuff I learned at the Persuasive Technology Lab for good? Let's use it for good and I know what good is because I'm a 23-year-old smart kid from Stanford.. So we built this thing that basically let the economists would be one of our customers and you would highlight something on the page and we would persuade you to basically go deeper and learn about something..

We were just making, we called it lighter fluid for sparks of curiosity.. We thought what could go wrong? We have pure, good intentions.. We're just trying to help people learn things.. We're persuading them to learn and we used all these little persuasive design techniques.. And as I was building the company, we raised venture capital, we had a team of 12 people.. As I was sitting there and what got me waking up in the morning was gosh, I really want to help people learn things.. That was about all I could think about.. But at the end of the day, everything that my company did was not actually about helping people learn.. What it really mattered for the business was whether or not we could tell the economist that we were increasing how much attention or time people were spending on his website.. You guys following? So I had this goal of hey, on the web, we're going to provide this technology that's going to make it easy to learn about things..

But the way we sold that to the publisher of The Economist was by saying we're going to help people spend more time on your website.. And so I had 12 people that worked at the company and I recruited them by being really passionate, by being just classic like, we're going to change the world, we're going to make people learn about things, it's going to be great, and they really believed it.. I was very persuasive as the CEO of the company.. And I honestly, as the founder of the company, couldn't admit that there was a gap between my positive intentions as a human being, waking up, wanting to do this good and the ultimate thing that we were measured by, which was to capture human attention.. And when you're young and raising money and all your friends are starting companies, there's this temptation to compare yourself, right? They raised this much money from DFJ and oh, I only raised it from this other VC.. Or they recruited this brilliant guy from LinkedIn and we recruited these other people.. And there's all these dynamics when you're running something after you've built together a team and you're basically out there in the world with your company and your product that how deeply will you be able to examine your own motivations and beliefs and see maybe what I'm doing isn't about helping people how to learn at all.. If that were true, would I be willing to see that that was true? Now think about it.. We raised \$4 million.. We had a team of 12

people..

Their families, their livelihoods depended on me.. I had a huge amount of responsibility.. I was just trying to make a business work and here I as starting to question whether the entire premise, the values, the core of what I was doing every day, were we actually doing that?..