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What Is Ethical Persuasion?

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Design ethicist Tristan Harris describes how our mind-body system makes us susceptible to persuasion because of how humans evolved. The co-founder and director of the nonprofit initiative Time Well Spent, Harris shares the philosophical questions that launched his advocacy and underscores their importance because to ubiquity of digital devices and platforms in modern life.

Transcript

- You know, if you take the human evolutionary code, you're living inside of a meat suit mind-body.. Right, that was tombed millions of years ago.. So your offer addiction for sugar, salt, fat were two millions of years ago when they were scarce, but here we are now, and they're abundant.. So we've got all these tunings, and you're living inside of it, and it can't really change.. You don't really have much optionality.. So you're living inside this thing, and if you made a map of every single string you could pull on this mind-body system to persuade it, if you could make a map of how could you addict a human body or a human mind, how can you pull on its sense of belonging? How can you make it feel like it's missing out? How could you get it to do certain behaviors? How could you get it to think about certain things? How could you get it to make certain choices? So if you had a map of every single way that a human being could be manipulated, that was the first part of the study, the task.. Second part of the study was what would it mean to ethically persuade? So what's constituted in ethically pushing this human animal around in the world? And then the last question is values.. What are we pushing it around for? And who's to say, how do we know we have values we can stand on? That we can actually persuade people in an ethical way.. So I, basically, studied this topic, and I want to say that I didn't know what I was doing.. I was basically trying to figure out this answer to this question, of whether we want to or not..

Google's gonna bump its elbow, and Apple's gonna bump its elbow, and Facebook's gonna bump its elbow, and a billion people are just gonna go in these different directions, right? Because when you wake up in the morning, it's important just to set the context.. Two billion people that wake up in the morning, and the first thing they do is they check their phone, and we check it 150 times a day, in the bathroom, coffee line, going to sleep.. We spend a lot of time on these devices, and even when we're not looking at the device the thoughts that are in your mind right now are still partly set by the time you did spend looking at the device.. So we have this, kind of, 24/7 emersion in this environment.. And I didn't know what I was doing in studying this question.. I just found it to be fascinating, and important, and interesting, and here I am literally, whatever it is, it's three years later.. It's November 1, 2017, and the U.S.. Congress is questioning Facebook, Google, and Twitter about exactly the stuff that I've been interested for the last three years.. And I honestly find myself, right now, at the center of one of the most important and invisible problems, I think, in history.. Which is that it's not just that there's this system that's kind of bumping its elbows into people's psychology, but we gave this system a set of goals that are causing tremendous harm...