

URL: <https://stvp.stanford.edu/clips/an-arms-race-for-your-attention>

Despite the overt missions of global platforms like Facebook and Google to make the world more open and connected, what they actually want to do is capture our attention, according to design ethicist Tristan Harris, co-founder and director of Time Well Spent, a nonprofit movement calling on tech companies to better align their products with human values. To understand a company's true goals, Harris says you need only look at what they are beholden to.



Transcript

- The reason I told you this story about why I had these positive intentions and with my company Aperture, we wanted to help people learn, and how there was this doubt club process to try and figure out what that might've been, you know, what really would've been underneath there, and you know, that I had to actually examine the core beliefs that I had is because I think that just like everybody in the technology industry, all these companies that were up there today in congress have very positive intentions for the world.. Everybody at Google and Facebook and Twitter that I know really, really cares about delivering the best possible, you know, world that we can create, and yet, I would say that something like the statement, "Our mission is to make the world more open and connected," is just the same as me saying, "I wanna help people learn about stuff," because what is that actually about? What it's actually about is capturing human attention.. Mark Zuckerberg actually faced the exact same dilemma that I faced, except he raised a lot more money and his company's in the public stock, you know, stock market, and one of the most profitable companies in history, and controls what two billion people will think every day.. But how could someone like Mark Zuckerberg question whether or not everything that they do every day is actually about making the world more open and connected? If you think it's hard as a founder when you're comparing yourself to your friends and whether or not you hired the good people, you raised money from some impressive people, talk about what it would be like to run one of the most powerful corporations in history influencing what two billion people in every language think and believe, the terms of people's social relationships, and to actually question whether or not the thing that you think you're doing, because you know you're good, you know that you're trying to do good, but how that might be different than the actual result, and the first thing you have to do is pay attention to incentives, and I think this is really important as an entrepreneur 'cause all of us, I'm assuming many of you are gonna go off in the world and start companies, is pay attention to who is paying who.. What is the actual thing that you're beholden to? With my company, it was The Economist.. They were our customer, and we had to do one thing for them which was keep people on their web site for longer.. Let's look at Facebook.. Their business model is advertising.. No matter what good they want to do in the world, their stock price is dependent on how much attention they capture.. YouTube's Google stock price part of YouTube is dependent on keeping people's attention..

Twitter's stock price is dependent on keeping people's attention.. Everything else they say is an intention that's outside of that.. It's a dream.. It's something that they'd like to have happen, but the end of the day, the thing that they're beholden to, is capturing human attention, and I wanna talk about why the situation, I'm gonna take you down a little journey which might leave you some of you more alarmed than you intended to be, but I promise that I'll turn it around at the end.. I wanna scare you for a moment about where we are because I think that we're in a much more dangerous situation than people tend to recognize.. The goal of capturing human attention becomes this arms race for who's better at being a better magician and pulling on the strings of the human mind, right? So you have these products competing, and everyone's trying to figure out, how can I get more attention, and then my friend Mike Krieger at Instagram says, "Hey," just like with Twitter, "Let's add the number of followers "that you have to our product." If we had the number of followers we have, then everybody has to login every day to see how many they have, and they wanna get more, so they have to come back to the product every day.. So this one tiny design choice, right, these products just evolved, it's like an organism that evolved this new hand and that hand is really adaptive for the adaptive environment, which is what's good at capturing attention.. We just invented this new persuasive thing.. But what could the consequences of that be, and how would you as an engineer or designer be thinking about that? You might say, well, we're helping the world because now people know, like, who's following them and now people know that they can connect with certain people that are interested in their interests and you can see the list of who follows you and there's all sorts of benefits, positive things, that could come from that, and when you're a human being living

inside of the eyes and mind and beliefs of someone who makes Instagram or Twitter, you're thinking about it in terms of those positive things because that's what you're trying to do, but how would you know that it might cause a whole bunch of other externalities, because right now the number of people who define their self-worth based on the number of followers they have.. David Brooks wrote a book called Road to Character and he talks about the World Values Survey and how people value different things over time, and one of the big things that's changed is that people went from valuing fame as the number 18 on the list, to valuing fame as number one on the list..

So, and that's in the last, sorry, it's in the last like, I think 10 years or something like that, and I would argue that the reason that like, literally billions of people now value fame higher on the list is actually because of little tiny, seemingly innocuous things like putting the number of followers that you have in the core of our software interfaces, right?..