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## How a handful of tech companies control billions of minds every day

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I want you to imagine walking into a room, a control room with a bunch of people, a hundred people, hunched over a desk with little dials, and that that control room will shape the thoughts and feelings of a billion people. This might sound like science fiction, but this actually exists right now, today.

5 I know because I used to be in one of those control rooms. I was a design ethicist at *Google*, where I studied how do you ethically steer people's thoughts? Because what we don't talk about is how a handful of people working at a handful of technology companies through their choices will steer what a billion people are thinking today. Because when you pull out your phone and they design how this works or what's on the feed, it's scheduling little blocks of time in our minds. If you see a notification, it schedules you to have thoughts that maybe you didn't intend to have. If you swipe over that notification, it schedules you into spending a little bit of time getting sucked into something that maybe you didn't intend to get sucked into. When we talk about technology, we tend to talk about it as this blue sky opportunity. It could go any direction. And I want to get serious for a moment and tell you why it's going in a very specific direction. Because it's not evolving randomly. There's a hidden goal driving the direction of all of the technology we make, and that goal is the race for our attention. Because every news site, *TED*, elections, politicians, games, even meditation apps have to compete for one thing, which is our attention, and there's only so much of it. And the best way to get people's attention is to know how someone's mind works. And there's a whole bunch of persuasive techniques that I learned in college at a lab called the Persuasive Technology Lab to get people's attention.

A simple example is *YouTube*. *YouTube* wants to maximize how much time you spend. And so what do they do? They autoplay the next video. And let's say that works really well. They're getting a little bit more of people's time. Well, if you're *Netflix*, you look at that and say, well, that's shrinking my market share, so I'm going to autoplay the next episode. But then if you're *Facebook*, you say, well no, that's shrinking all of my market share, so now I have to autoplay all the videos in the newsfeed before waiting for you to click play. So the internet is not evolving at random. The reason it feels like it's sucking us in the way it is, is because of this race for attention. We know where this is going. Technology is not neutral, and it becomes this race to the bottom of the brain stem of who can go lower to get it.

30 Let me give you an example of *Snapchat*. If you didn't know, *Snapchat* is the number one way that teenagers in the United States communicate. So if you're like me, and you use text messages to communicate, *Snapchat* is that for teenagers, and there's, like, a hundred million of them that use it. And they invented a feature called Snapstreaks, which shows the number of days in a row that two people have communicated with each other. In other words, what they just did is they gave two people something they don't want to lose. Because if you're a teenager, and you have 150 days in a row, you don't want that to go away. And so think of the little blocks of time that that schedules in kids' minds. This isn't theoretical: when kids go on vacation, it's been shown they give their passwords to up to five other friends to keep their Snapstreaks going, even when they can't do

40 it. And they have, like, 30 of these things, and so they have to get through taking photos of just  
pictures or walls or ceilings just to get through their day. So it's not even like they're having real  
conversations. We have a temptation to think about this as, oh, they're just using, you know,  
*Snapchat* the way we used to gossip on the telephone. It's probably OK. Well, what this misses is  
that in the 1970s, when you were just gossiping on the telephone, there wasn't a hundred engineers  
on the other side of the screen who knew exactly how your psychology worked and orchestrated  
45 you into a double bind with each other.

Now, if this is making you feel a little bit of outrage, notice that that thought just comes over  
you. Outrage is a really good way also of getting your attention, because we don't choose outrage. It  
happens to us. And if you're the *Facebook* newsfeed, whether you'd want to or not, you actually  
benefit when there's outrage. Because outrage doesn't just schedule a reaction in emotional time,  
50 space, for you. We want to share that outrage with other people. So we want to hit share and  
say, "Can you believe the thing that they said?" And so outrage works really well at getting  
attention, such that if *Facebook* had a choice between showing you the outrage feed and a calm  
newsfeed, they would want to show you the outrage feed, not because someone consciously chose  
that, but because that worked better at getting your attention. And the newsfeed control room is  
55 not accountable to us. It's only accountable to maximizing attention. It's also accountable, because  
of the business model of advertising, for anybody who can pay the most to actually walk into the  
control room and say, "That group over there, I want to schedule these thoughts into their  
minds." So you can target, you can precisely target a lie directly to the people who are most  
susceptible. And because this is profitable, it's only going to get worse.

60 So I'm here today because the costs are so obvious. I don't know a more urgent problem than  
this, because this problem is underneath all other problems. It's not just taking away our agency to  
spend our attention and live the lives that we want, it's changing the way that we have our  
conversations, it's changing our democracy, and it's changing our ability to have the conversations  
and relationships we want with each other. And it affects everyone, because a billion people have one  
65 of these<sup>1</sup> in their pocket.

So how do we fix this? We need to make three radical changes to technology and to our society. The  
first is we need to acknowledge that we are persuadable. Once you start understanding that your  
mind can be scheduled into having little thoughts or little blocks of time that you didn't choose,  
wouldn't we want to use that understanding and protect against the way that that happens? I think  
70 we need to see ourselves fundamentally in a new way. It's almost like a new period of human  
history, like the Enlightenment<sup>2</sup>, but almost a kind of self-aware Enlightenment, that we can be  
persuaded, and there might be something we want to protect. The second is we need new models  
and accountability systems so that as the world gets better and more and more persuasive over time  
– because it's only going to get more persuasive – that the people in those control rooms are  
75 accountable and transparent to what we want. The only form of ethical persuasion that exists is  
when the goals of the persuader are aligned with the goals of the persuadee<sup>3</sup>. And that involves  
questioning big things, like the business model of advertising. Lastly, we need a design  
renaissance, because once you have this view of human nature, that you can steer the timelines of a  
billion people – just imagine, there's people who have some desire about what they want to do and  
80 what they want to be thinking and what they want to be feeling and how they want to be  
informed, and we're all just tugged into these other directions. And you have a billion people just  
tugged into all these different directions. Well, imagine an entire design renaissance that tried to

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<sup>1</sup> (here) smartphone

<sup>2</sup> period of European history in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries when ideals of reason, science and knowledge became prominent

<sup>3</sup> the person being persuaded

orchestrate the exact and most empowering time-well-spent way for those timelines to happen. And that would involve two things: one would be protecting against the timelines that we don't want to be experiencing, the thoughts that we wouldn't want to be happening, so that when that ding happens, not having the ding that sends us away; and the second would be empowering us to live out the timeline that we want.

So let me give you a concrete example. Today, let's say your friend cancels dinner on you, and you are feeling a little bit lonely. And so what do you do in that moment? You open up *Facebook*. And in that moment, the designers in the control room want to schedule exactly one thing, which is to maximize how much time you spend on the screen. Now, instead, imagine if those designers created a different timeline that was the easiest way, using all of their data, to actually help you get out with the people that you care about? Think, just imagine how alleviating all loneliness in society, if that was the timeline that *Facebook* wanted to make possible for people. Or imagine a different conversation where, let's say you wanted to post something supercontroversial on *Facebook*, which is a really important thing to be able to do, to talk about controversial topics. And right now, when there's that big comment box, it's almost asking you, what key do you want to type? In other words, it's scheduling a little timeline of things you're going to continue to do on the screen. And imagine instead that there was another button there saying, what would be most time well spent for you? And you click "host a dinner." And right there underneath the item it said, "Who wants to RSVP for the dinner?" And so you'd still have a conversation about something controversial, but you'd be having it in the most empowering place on your timeline, which would be at home that night with a bunch of a friends over to talk about it. So imagine we're running, like, a find and replace on all of the timelines that are currently steering us towards more and more screen time persuasively and replacing all of those timelines with what do we want in our lives.

It doesn't have to be this way. Instead of handicapping our attention, imagine if we used all of this data and all of this power and this new view of human nature to give us a superhuman ability to focus and a superhuman ability to put our attention to what we cared about and a superhuman ability to have the conversations that we need to have for democracy. The most complex challenges in the world require not just us to use our attention individually. They require us to use our attention and coordinate it together. Climate change is going to require that a lot of people are being able to coordinate their attention in the most empowering way together. And imagine creating a superhuman ability to do that.

Sometimes the world's most pressing<sup>4</sup> and important problems are not these hypothetical future things that we could create in the future. Sometimes the most pressing problems are the ones that are right underneath our noses, the things that are already directing a billion people's thoughts. And maybe instead of getting excited about the new augmented reality<sup>5</sup> and virtual reality and these cool things that could happen, which are going to be susceptible to the same race for attention, if we could fix the race for attention on the thing that's already in a billion people's pockets. Maybe instead of getting excited about the most exciting new cool fancy education apps, we could fix the way kids' minds are getting manipulated into sending empty messages back and forth.

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<sup>4</sup> (here) urgent

<sup>5</sup> *augmented reality*: technology that combines data from the physical world with technological data