

#1369 The Business Model That Ate the World (Facebook)

JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT: Welcome to this episode of the award-winning Best of the Left podcast, in which we shall learn about the rising concern over Facebook as more and more negative impacts of the site become evident to an ever-expanding group of concerned people. And more specifically, we show how it is the fundamental business model of Facebook that is at the heart of its problems. Also today: two major changes to the show are taking place, very coincidentally, both on today's episode. So stay tuned to learn all about that.

Clips today are from Democracy Now!, On the Media, Your Undivided Attention, The Social Dilemma, the Michael Brooks Show, and TedTalks.

Early Facebook Investor We Need to Hold Big Tech Accountable For Creating “Toxic Digital Spills” - Democracy Now! - Air Date 10-27-19

AMY GOODMAN - HOST DEMOCRACY NOW: AOC tweeted, “Hypothetically, if you were, say, a member of Congress sitting on the Financial Services Committee given 5 minutes to question Mark Zuckerberg, what would you ask?” What would you advise these congressmembers ask Mark Zuckerberg, the man you knew very well, you invested in early on?

ROGER MCNAMEE: So, I think the issue for all members of Congress, irrespective of what committee they're on, essentially distills to the same thing, which is, “Mr. Zuckerberg, you've built one of the most successful businesses in American history, but at enormous cost.” To me, Facebook is like the oil companies of the '50s. It's artificially profitable because it pours waste products wherever it feels like. Think about it. In the '50s, chemical companies would pour mercury into fresh water. Mining companies would leave the residue wherever it fell. Gas stations would pour oil into the sewer. And the destruction to our public health and to our environment was enormous.

And eventually we woke up and realized that the oil companies should be responsible for all this. And I believe that every member of Congress—in fact, everyone at every level of government in the United States and elsewhere—needs to hold internet platforms accountable, because what they're creating are toxic digital spills, and they're doing enormous harm to society. And in financial services, in my mind, their question today relates to a cryptocurrency. There is no way in God's green Earth Facebook should be allowed to do that. But not just Facebook, no corporation should be allowed to create a currency that competes with the dollar. That's just not in the national interest.

In fact, you know, you mentioned a moment ago Greta Thunberg. If I can just pivot slightly, there's a point I would love to make to all of the viewers, which is, if you look at the biggest issues we face as a country, whether it's climate change, whether it's anti-vax, whether it is gun violence or white supremacy or anti-immigrant, on every one of these issues, the

harmful side of the argument, the one that is denying climate change or is promoting anti-vax or promoting gun violence or white supremacy, in each case, that side gets amplification, because of internet platforms, that gives them more political power than their numbers should allow. And if we want to fix climate change, if we want to fix gun violence or end the mania of anti-vax, we're going to have to do something about internet platforms. And that is the common issue affecting politics across all of America.

And let's understand, this is not an accident. This stuff is not about the freedom of speech or freedom of expression. It's about the fact that these companies amplify hate speech, disinformation and conspiracy theories, because that stuff is just more profitable for them. And in my mind, they should no more be allowed to do that than a chemical company should be allowed to pour mercury into fresh water.

AMY GOODMAN - HOST DEMOCRACY NOW: So, let me ask you about some of what you wrote in *Zucked*. I mean, all of these issues, you raise, but you write about changes that grew the social network into the giant it is today. You say, "In researching this book for key moments in the history of Facebook, one that stands out occurred months before I got involved. In the fall of 2005, Facebook gave users the ability to upload photographs. They did it with a new wrinkle—tagging the people in the photo—that helped to define Facebook's approach to engagement. Tagging proved to be a technology with persuasive power, as users felt obligated to react or reciprocate when informed they had been tagged. A few months after my first meeting with Zuck, Facebook made two huge changes: it launched News Feed, and it opened itself up to anyone over the age of thirteen with a valid email address." Keep talking about News Feed and the significance of photographs when it comes, for example, to the issue of privacy, and what Mark Zuckerberg understood.

ROGER MCNAMEE: So, I think that Zuck had a clearer understanding of these issues than I gave him credit for at the time. His notion of collecting everyone in the world on one network, had elements in it of virtue. You could see that there were cases, as with the Women's March or Black Lives Matter or the March for Our Lives, where you could use a network like that to organize people for good.

The problem with it is that the way Mark did it, the way he did all of these things, was to eliminate friction. His notion was he didn't want people thinking about posts; he just wanted them scrolling and scrolling and scrolling. And by eliminating the friction, he eliminated essentially the opportunity for people to adapt to what he was doing. He eliminated, really, opportunities for creativity, for contemplation and debate. And in doing so, he really has undermined the social fabric of the country.

And it started so innocently. Photo tagging doesn't seem like a big deal, but it does trigger this need for social reciprocity, which is essentially involuntary in us, and it becomes a habit. They send you a notification, you think the notification is personal, it's from an AI and it's there to provoke you. And it provokes you enough to create a habit. And for most of us, the habit becomes an addiction. And I say it's an addiction because ask yourself this: I mean, Amy, when do you check your smartphone first thing in the morning? Is it before you pee or while you're peeing? Because for most of us, that's the range, right? Nobody waits until after they're done.

And so, at the end of the day, once they have us addicted, they own us. And then, after that, it's about the manipulation and amplification of hostile voices in order to keep this whole

thing moving and profitable for them. And it started innocently, and it happened like a frog in water coming to a boil. Right? We just didn't notice what was going on. And each new thing was more convenient than the last thing. And convenience is a narcotic—we're all hooked to it.

And the trick here is we now have to recognize that, wait a minute, we actually have things in common, that meeting face to face, making eye contact, is actually really valuable, and that we shouldn't allow technology to control our lives. And I don't want to be the negative person here, because at the end of the day it's not about technology. There's nothing wrong with social media or search. The issue is this business model.

We can have social media, we can have all these things we like without all the harm, but we have to have regulation. And it's got to be antitrust, for competitive reasons, and then you have to eliminate this massive market in people's most intimate private data. I mean, these companies act as though they're doctors, and when the doctor inspects your liver, that they then own your liver. I mean, that's ridiculous. Our data should be a human right, it should not be there for third parties to treat as an asset and to commercialize. They should not touch it. Nobody should be making any kind of market in it any more than you're allowed to make a market in your kidneys or your legs.

The Covid Conspiracy Boom on Facebook - On the Media - Air Date 8-19-20

BOB GARFIELD - HOST, ON THE MEDIA: Facebook has declared a stance about misinformation and has claimed to have instituted various protocols to wipe it from its site in order to keep people "safe and informed" about coronavirus. And they have uttered this piety, misleading health content is particularly bad for our community.

Do you find any evidence to support that the company is doing anything to curb misinformation?

FADI QURAN: Facebook is acting to fight misinformation. Some of the steps that they have taken such as giving free advertisements to the World Health Organization, or creating the COVID Information Center, are useful and commendable steps, but the truth is they are not taking the key steps in terms of redesigning their social media algorithm and providing transparency to all users by correcting the record. That could really at least decrease the reach of health misinformation by between 80% to 90%. That could be decrease the number of people that believe misinformation by 50%.

And the best way to put this is Facebook's algorithm, the core of how Facebook works, is if these health misinformation super-spreaders are the Pablo Escobars. They're the ones producing all of this harmful content. The Facebook algorithm is the smuggler. It's the one that smuggles this bad content and puts it on people's phones so people see this misinformation. The steps Facebook is taking are like building one drug abuse center here in this neighborhood, but it's not actually solving the core problem, which has its algorithm. And there, we can say Facebook isn't acting and taking this issue as seriously as they claim to be.

BOB GARFIELD - HOST, ON THE MEDIA: I would argue that the core problem isn't the algorithm. The core problem is that the algorithm is the goose that lays the golden egg and that Facebook could make changes to it, but would in so doing, cut into its own traffic and the amount of time people spend on Facebook and cost it dollars. That they've made the decision not to make structural changes because it will impede their growth in their revenue. Is that just a paranoid fantasy?

FADI QURAN: No, I would say that you are 100% right. Essentially because the algorithm is what helps Facebook keep people addicted and make money. That's why Facebook does not move towards fixing it structurally, but I don't think that's only the reason. I also think that there's another reason here. When we talk about misinformation more broadly speaking, which is that Facebook's executives, Facebook's leaders, are afraid of challenging certain political actors, particularly authoritarian regimes, and actors that use misinformation and have used misinformation to come to power. And Facebook's leadership instead of putting the health of society first is number one putting gets financial gains first, but number two is not willing to challenge those bad actors because it fears the consequences of regulation or other steps that can be taken.

BOB GARFIELD - HOST, ON THE MEDIA: All right Fadi, I don't think I'm quite angry and desperate enough yet, so I just want to discuss one other dimension of this and that is that the data that you have produced represents only half the problem, right? Because your study is concerned only public Facebook pages, and there's this whole universe of private pages as well. Can you tell me about them?

FADI QURAN: Yes. So most of us know what public pages are. You can like them as a new start getting content in your newsfeed from these pages. And we found that 43% of the views going to these health-misinformation-spreading websites were coming from Facebook pages. But then you have a big portion, and it looks too big growing, that comes from whether it's people's private profiles, but more dangerously, these secret groups that Facebook now allows users to form.

And these are groups that can have up to hundreds of thousands of members. Well, our investigation and others, we can't look inside of these groups on Facebook. And what we're beginning to notice based on anecdotal evidence is bad actors are more and more beginning to use these secret groups to add people to them and to use them to spread misinformation and also election related disinformation. And Mark Zuckerberg after the Cambridge Analytica scandal, and the Mueller report, and what happened in 2016, made the announcement that the platform will do more to fight the problem of disinformation, but also made the announcement that Facebook was moving more to these closed groups and these encrypted messaging tools—Facebook also owns WhatsApp. And what we've been seeing is that as Facebook has begun to create these closed spaces on platforms that cannot be observed, that can not be investigated, that can not be held accountable, it's creating that space for these bad actors to again, come out and influence our politics, influence people's health. And Facebook is not doing anything to mitigate the threat that has been created by these secret groups.

BOB GARFIELD - HOST, ON THE MEDIA: All right, I'm going to come back finally, to just a previous answer. We were discussing Facebook's conflict of interest and the algorithm it depends on. What specifically could it do to that algorithm if its principle interests were not

it's revenue growth, but the wellbeing of the public? What specific steps could it take to eliminate or reduce this problem?

FADI QURAN: That's the core question and we propose two short term solutions. The first is what we call "detoxing the algorithm". And what this would mean is that, number one, let's say a fact checker or the World Health Organization, or the CDC, makes a clear correction about the idea that wearing masks could help decrease the spread of the virus. Facebook can go to every person on the platform who was targeted on the platform and say, "Hey user X, Hey Bob, last week you saw this post that claimed that masks would suffocate you. In fact, here's a correction from the World Health Organization, here's a correction from the CDC." And academic studies show that if Facebook were just to train the algorithm to do that, for independently fact check pieces of misinformation, it would decrease the belief in disinformation by 50%. The other step then, in terms of detox, is when you have this systematic spreaders of misinformation that Facebook knows are abusing its system and sharing a lot of bad content, Facebook could redesign the algorithm to ensure that these bad actors are downgraded.

And of course you would want checks and balances, this is why we call for democratic regulation of the platform, but by taking those steps together, Facebook could begin disincentivizing. number one, bad actors from spreading misinformation, and the algorithm would begin to err more on the side of the facts than on the side of amplifying the bad content. In the longterm, what Facebook needs to do is, and this is where not only Avaaz but governments now around the world are beginning to demand, that Facebook is more transparent about how its algorithm works. So that researchers from across the world can come in and tweak the algorithm so that it does not continually give preference to sensationalist content, to conspiracy theories, and to bad actors. And so that would require an audit and then it would require reprogramming of the algorithm.

And although our hope had been, for the last 3-4 years, that public pressure and campaigning and good people inside Facebook would take the step independently. It's clear now that we will need to push Congress and we will need to push the European commission and other actors to force Facebook to move in that direction.

Beyond the Boycott - Your Undivided Attention - Air

Date 7-10-20

TRISTAN HARRIS - HOST, YOUR UNDIVIDED ATTENTION: You may have heard about the recent advertisers boycott of social media this month. It's called stop hate for profit. And more than 500 companies have joined the campaign so far, including huge brands like Unilever, Coca-Cola, Starbucks, McDonald's, Honda. The campaign has been driven by the NAACP, Color of Change, and the Anti-Defamation League. Why is this campaign happening now? Well, I think we've given you ample evidence on this podcast of how hate has a home field advantage in social media. Per the recent Wall Street Journal expose, 64% of the extremist groups that were joined on Facebook were due to Facebook's own recommendation algorithms. We know that Boogaloo boys groups, which refer to Civil War II were recommended by Facebook, and actually led to a federal officer being killed in Oakland, California.

I think why this campaign is happening now is that people are fed up. They know that there's a problem. Many people can't quite put their finger on it, but they have seen so much damage and polarization and outrage, and this is true across the board in social media. We've seen how YouTube, some of the top verbs that are listed in the titles on videos are dismantles, debunked, snaps, realizes, screams, obliterates, shreds, defies, owns, confronts, insults, this is the background radiation of hate that wins in the attention economy. The Center for Humane Technology is also advising the campaign and you can add your own name to their petition at stophateforprofit.org.

So what's the significance of this development? Could this boycott actually lead to meaningful change? Well, soon after the campaign launched on Friday the 26th of June, Facebook stock dropped by more than 8% and lost \$55 billion in shareholder value. This had meaningful change in getting advertisers on the phone. Now, obviously Facebook stock climbed back up to its all-time high just a week later. Still, nothing has actually moved the needle as much as this boycott has. We shouldn't have to resort to using the moral compass of a few advertisers and corporations to force Facebook's hand into doing more good faster to reverse some of these problems. But that's unfortunately the situation we've been in.

Regulation ironically takes years to pass, so what's interesting about this development is how quickly you can move when you can get the moral compass of advertisers aligned behind a direction and say definitively that Facebook has not done enough in the ways that its platform intrinsically creates these problems. So would this lead to significant change? Well, judging by Facebook's own words, no, not at all. Nick Clegg Facebook's VP of global affairs wrote an op ed "platforms like Facebook hold up a mirror to society". Well, if you listen to literally any episode of this podcast, you'll understand why that's absolute nonsense.

Mark Zuckerberg for his part reportedly told his own employees last week that, "My guess is that all these advertisers will be back on the platform soon enough." Facebook has more than 8 million advertisers on its platform and no one or two or even 10 advertisers make up even 1% of Facebook's \$70 billion a year in advertising revenue. There's no 80-20 rule where just a small number of advertisers make up a large fraction of the revenue because there's just millions and millions of long tail businesses and individuals and political campaigns that are all advertising on Facebook at the same time. This means that it's hard for a boycott to have a financial impact on Facebook's bottom line. That said, what matters here isn't the financial impact as much as changing the public conversation, that what is happening right now with Facebook and the amount of polarization and divisive and outrage evocation of our societies is not okay. This demonstrates why regulation and policy are so important. Zuckerberg's primary orientation over and over again seems to be to ensure that Facebook does not get regulated. Supposedly the reason why Facebook has taken such Laissez-faire stance on all these issues is due to the centrality of one person, Joel Kaplan, who sits at the top of Facebook's public policy arm.

As I understand it, there are many teams within Facebook who are working on integrity efforts, efforts to catch more hate speech, to catch the Boogaloo boys, things like this, and that those efforts, some of them, are getting blocked because ultimately the interests of Facebook's government relations teams takes priority over the interests of those who are working on the ground closest to the harms, and the people who are working hard on the integrity teams inside of Facebook and Twitter and YouTube are closest to some of those harms because they run the queries that say, "Well, how bad is hate or racist speech in these

different jurisdictions or zip codes or countries on daily basis?" Knowing what those harms are, they are the ones who are devising solutions that they think will help.

But if they don't have the power to enact those better policies because they're overruled by the government relations team, because they don't want to be regulated, we're never going to solve these problems. I think it's instructive that Facebook's own civic integrity team, as I've understood it, is actually funded by the antitrust budget, the part of the company whose budget is so that the company doesn't get broken up.

Now, one of the interesting things here has to do with organizational structure and chain of command. In Twitter's case, the civic integrity teams responsible for fact checking political kinds of speech actually have more power than the public policy team. There's a great article called *Inside Twitter's Decision to Fact Check Trump's Tweets*. Within Twitter, the team's responsible for trust and safety had the first authority to flag his tweet and it was flagged first as needing a warning label, and then it was only after that that it went to Twitter's VP of global public policy and its top liaison to government. In other words, with Twitter, the system is set up that way to keep enforcement decisions independent from the teams responsible for PR and government relations.

In contrast, Facebook routes critical policy decisions through their policy chief, Joel Kaplan, who's also the company's main man in Washington, an arrangement that its former chief security officer recently criticized, that's Alex Stamos. In other words, how do we make sure that there's a clean divide between the separation of church and state inside of an organization, which mirrors the same thing that we had to do in journalism? You would never want the New York Times to withhold a news story that was critical of let's say one of its advertisers, because it was critical of one of its advertisers. You would want the editorial team to simply say what was true independent of whether it would harm their revenue.

Well, in this case, Facebook is beholden to the whims of their government relations team, which are equivalent to a newspapers advertising department. Integrity teams, which are the equivalent of its editorial teams are unable to make decisions that go against the values of the governments in which they operate. Again, this is so that Facebook can avoid being regulated. So one of the things that we need here is for companies like Facebook and Twitter to simply enforce the existing policies that they have and not give exceptions to the loudest and most powerful voices on their platforms. The advertisers that are involved in this boycott are still a long way from doing lasting damage to Facebook's bottom line.

But nonetheless, this could be a turning point because a lot of pressure is actually now being applied. For the first time Mark and Sheryl have had to be on the phone to figure out what they can do to bring those advertisers back. It's certainly moving the public's perception that there really is a problem here. Of course, the real problem is with their business model, and advertisers can't criticize that because they also depend on it. Even pulling their spend off of Facebook, where else can they put their advertising spend? One of the monopoly and antitrust issues here is that there isn't another place where you can actually reach your customers, and in a post-COVID era, an argument that Facebook might make is that advertisers actually need Facebook to use their microtargeting capacities to drive up demand and restart the economy.

So that's one of the problems here is that Facebook has become entangled with the actual economy itself. Small and medium-sized businesses use Facebook to reach their customers.

So there's much more to say here, but we just wanted to express our support for the overall movement in this direction, and that so much more needs to be done, especially going into this next election. But one thing we'd like to tell the journalists and those who are covering these topics is let's not be surprised when we find that there's yet another Facebook extremist group recommending a civil war or killing people in the streets or inciting racist violence. That would be kind of like writing news story headlines about, oh, we found a little bit more CO2 coming out of this Exxon factory or we count a little bit more methane coming out of this Chevron facility.

In the same way, we shouldn't be surprised to see more outrage or polarization or addiction coming out of technology companies because that's the DNA of their operation. That's why in the long run, we're going to need something much bigger than stock paper profit and go off to the business model itself.

The Business Model - The Social Dilemma

A lot of what we're saying sounds like it's just this one sided doom and gloom. Like, oh my God, technology is just ruining the world and it's ruining kids and it's like, no, it's confusing because it's simultaneous utopia and dystopia. Like, I can hit a button on my phone and a car shows up in 30 seconds and I can go exactly where I need to go. That is magic! That's amazing!

JUSTIN ROSENSTEIN: When we were making the Like button, our entire motivation was can we spread positivity and love in the world? The idea that fast forward to today, and teens would be getting depressed when they don't have enough likes or it could be leading to political polarization was nowhere on our radar.

JOE TOSCANO: I don't think these guys set out to be evil. It's just the business model that has a problem.

ALEX ROETTER: You could shut down the service and destroy, whatever it is, \$20 billion of shareholder value and get sued, but you can't in practice put the genie back in the bottle. You can make some tweaks, but at the end of the day, you've got to grow revenue and use it quarter over quarter. The bigger it gets, the harder it is for anyone to change.

TRISTAN HARRIS - HOST, YOUR UNDIVIDED ATTENTION: What I see is a bunch of people who are trapped by a business model, an economic incentive, and shareholder pressure that makes it almost impossible to do something else.

SANDY PARAKILAS: I think we need to accept that it's okay for companies to be focused on making money. What's not okay is when there's no regulation, no rules, and no competition and the companies are acting as sort of defacto governments. And then they're saying, well, we can regulate ourselves. I mean, that's just a lie. That's just ridiculous.

JASON LANIER: Financial incentives kind of run the world. So any solution to this problem has to realign the financial incentives.

JOE TOSCANO: There's no fiscal reason for these companies to change, and that is why I think we need regulation.

SANDY PARAKILAS: The phone company has tons of sensitive data about you, and we have a lot of laws that make sure they don't do the wrong things. We have almost no laws around digital privacy for example.

JOE TOSCANO: We could tax data collection processing the same way that you, for example, pay your water bill by monitoring the amount of water that you use. You tax these companies on the data assets that they have. It gives them a fiscal reason to not acquire every piece of data on the planet.

ROGER MCNAMEE: The law runs way behind on these things. But what I know is the current situation exists not for the protection of users, but for the protection of the rights and privileges of these gigantic, incredibly wealthy companies. Are we always going to defer to the richest, most powerful people, or are we ever going to say, "you know, there are times when there is a national interest"? There are times when the interest of people, of users, is actually more important than the profits of somebody who's already a billionaire.

SHOSHANA ZUBOFF, PHD: These markets undermine democracy and they undermine freedom and they should be outlawed. This is not a radical proposal. There are other markets that we outlaw. We outlaw markets in human organs, we outlaw markets in human slaves, because they have inevitable, destructive consequences.

JUSTIN ROSENSTEIN: We live in a world in which a tree is worth more financially, dead than alive. In a world in which a whale is worth more dead than alive. For so long as our economy works in that way, and corporations go unregulated, they're going to continue to destroy trees, to kill whales, to mine the earth, and to continue to pull oil out of the ground, even though we know it is destroying the planet, and we know that it's going to leave a worse world for future generations. This is short term thinking based on this religion of profit at all costs as if somehow magically, each corporation acting in its selfish interest is going to produce the best results.

This has been affecting the environment for a long time. What's frightening, and what hopefully is the last straw that will make us wake up as a civilization to how flawed this theory has been in the first place, is to see that now we're the tree, we're the whale. Our attention can be mined. We are more profitable to a corporation if we're spending time staring at a screen, staring at an ad than if we're spending that time living our life in a rich way. And so we're seeing the results of that. We're seeing corporations using powerful artificial intelligence to outsmart us, and figure out how to pull our attention for the things they want us to look at, rather than things that are most consistent with our goals and our values and our lives.

Voting Is Not Enough: Work to Overcome Racist Voter Suppression in Yet Another Election Without the Full Voting Rights Act - Best of the Left

AMANDA HOFFMAN - ACTIVISM, BEST OF THE LEFT: You've reached the activism portion of today's show. Now that you're informed and angry, here's what you can do about it. Today's activism work to overcome racist voter suppression, in Yet Another Election Without the Full Voting Rights Act

As of the publishing of this episode, there are exactly 42 days until Election Day. That's 6 weeks. A month and a half.

To make sure every one of those days to count, we've launched our 2020 Election Action Guide, which we're calling "Voting Is Not Enough." Because...it's just not. All of the segments and information can be accessed from the "Voting is Not Enough" banner at BestoftheLeft.com, or directly at BestoftheLeft.com/2020action.

We want to start today by acknowledging the devastating loss of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. May her memory be a blessing, and a revolution. Justice Ginsburg, using the law as her tool, dedicated her life to making our society more equal and to protecting rights of all kinds, including voting rights. When her conservative colleagues gutted the Voting Rights Act in 2013, she famously wrote in her passionate dissent, "Throwing out pre-clearance when it has worked and is continuing to work to stop discriminatory changes is like throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet."

As we face yet another national election without the key protections of the Voting Rights Act, we have to work 100 times harder to ensure marginalized groups get access to the ballot. New, strict voter ID laws, proof of citizenship laws, increased purging of voter rolls, increased closing of polling places in predominantly poor, Black, Brown and Indigenous communities...these are the fallouts of losing the full protections of the Voting Rights Act.

So, how do we overcome these racist and oppressive hurdles? Here are a few ways...

1] Confirm Voter Registration & Talk to Purged Voters: As we mentioned in our last segment, voter registration is key. But it's not just about getting new people to register - though that's important - it's also about making sure registered voters haven't been purged and have updated their address or name change. Having an updated registration can be the difference between a regular ballot or a provisional ballot on election day. With voter registration deadlines coming up fast, commit to helping people register and check their status. Visit Vote.org for all the links you need, or visit nationalvoterregistrationday.org and look under Resources for the Toolkit for Individuals.

This year, Grassroots Democrats HQ and Field Team 6 have made it possible to volunteer to phone or text bank actual purged voters in key states and help them get re-registered! Many people never know they have been purged until it's too late, so help alert these voters to their status and get them registered again. Go to FieldTeam6.org - that's field team and the number six .org - and check their Calendar of Events for opportunities.

2] Help People Get Necessary Voter IDs: Voter ID laws aren't going away any time soon, so Vote Riders has begun providing voter ID assistance to help every American cast a ballot. VoteRiders will help you identify the documents you need to get an ID, request and pay for the documents, pay the DMV fees, and even drive you to the DMV for free. Call or text their help line at 844-338-8743 or go to VoteRiders.org/freehelp to submit an online form and get started. If you don't need an ID, you can become a volunteer to help make sure voters know the information they need and/or donate to support their sadly necessary work.

3] Increase Black Voter Turnout: The NAACP's Black Voices Change Lives is using indirect relational voter turnout to mobilize Black voters this fall. This means engaged Black voters call unengaged Black voters in specific battleground states where the data shows that the

Black vote is the determining factor in the outcome. If you don't identify as Black, you are still welcome to volunteer. Go to BlackVoicesChangeLives.org for more.

4] Become a Poll Worker: As we've previously mentioned, becoming a poll worker is one of the most effective things you can do to help fight the closing of polling places and reduce long lines. Go to WorkElections.com to find out how to sign up in your state, or go to MoreThanAVote.org which is specifically recruiting poll workers in heavily Black districts across the country.

We know the Supreme Court nomination and Senate races are at the top of everyone's mind right now, but fighting voter suppression is essential to making sure we have a shot at saving our democracy come November. We'll be focusing on the Senate races next time, but we've included links in the show notes today to get you started. Use the time saved to ponder how we came to have a system where the passing of one, 87-year-old-woman caused tens of millions of people to be gripped with justifiable fear and existential dread.

The segment notes include all the links to this information as well as additional resources, and, once again, this segment is available on the "Voting is Not Enough" page at BestoftheLeft.com/2020action.

So, if making sure disenfranchised voters have a voice this November is important to you, be sure to spread the word about Working to Overcome Racist Voter Suppression in Yet Another Election Without the Full Voting Rights Act via social media - or, uh, maybe call a few friends instead so that others in your network can spread the word too.

When Attention Went on Sale - Your Undivided Attention - Air Date 4-28-20

TIM WU: We are in a time where we've sort of accepted the unrestricted, unregulated mining of the human consciousness, the harvesting of human attention. In a [way], we are the resource, and I think it takes its toll. And I think there is a particular concern that I have with the concentration of the power to do so in a smaller number of entities, one or two or three monopolis or oligopolis or whatever word you want to do.

And that comes from my concern that the monopolization of attention markets historically has been an extremely potent and powerful source of both political power and commercial power that is hard to hold accountable, and essentially vests a small number of actors with a great number of the powers of government. And these powers haven't been exercised fully. Obviously we've had totalitarian regimes, which seize that power, or the Soviet Union, and used it to every extent possible. But we're building the mechanism for it when we allow the monopoly form to come to dominate attention markets. We're creating the infrastructure for control of the masses.

And I think that should be a concern to anyone with a knowledge of the history or a concern for democratic governance.

TRISTAN HARRIS - HOST, YOUR UNDIVIDED ATTENTION: People look at proposals saying we have to break up the big tech companies in response to problems like misinformation,

polarization, addiction, mental health, isolation, and they say, that's not going to solve the problem.

So like, why should we do this break-them-up thing? But you're pointing to a more dangerous, different thing, which is the pure consolidation of power into single entities creates this kind of temptation with the government to sort of want to be in bed with that power and to kind of commandeer it or to be in relationship to it.

Why is the concentration of economic power, just on its own, even if it was steel or railroads, linked to things like populism, extremism, or fascism?

TIM WU: With the rise of concentrated power and monopoly across the economy, not just in tech, it also tends to lead to long lasting inequality. And the reason is that the monopoly and oligopoly forms tends to aggregate profit towards itself as opposed to spread it out.

And one of the things you saw in the thirties was an enormous suffering in the middle classes, which created this appetite for stronger leaders who were going to, you know, finally lead the country back to where it needed to go. And, I don't think there's any doubt, not just the United States, but around the world, you're seeing in this extraordinary rise of populism, and much of it is actually anchored in kind of an anti-monopoly spirit or a sense that the wealthy are getting everything. And it's familiar from the 1930s.

To give you a few examples, the German movement that led ultimately to the Third Reich was in many ways, almost an anti-globalization protest.

And the most interesting thing I think about one like Hitler and other leaders of the Third Reich is that they both catered to the populist anger, said they were going to sort of take on the global economy on their behalf, but also made friends and made friendly with the great monopolists. So they managed this balancing act and I think you see it in our current times. You look at a country like Brazil, where you have this rise to power of authoritarian government again, after decades. Now, right now it's elected, but it could get worse. And a lot of that was premised on the idea that there's this huge economic crash; Brazil had given all too much to the monopolies. Everything was about globalization.

And again, the leadership is trying to do this thing where they both weirdly promise the working classes a new destiny, a return to greatness, national salvation, but at the same time are also catering to and gaining support from monopolies in terms of: we'll keep the labor unions down, we will create new markets for you to explore and so forth.

So that's the pattern I think we need to look out for. And you know, this doesn't directly relate to the intentional economy, except in the following form, which is, I think that the more monopolized the channels of communication are, the easier it is to access attention and control it. The greater the possibilities, for using those channels as well for having a media or social media that is friendly to government become compounded.

And that's the kind of thing I'm worried about. And so, when you hear about Warren wants break up big tech, or people at want to prevent big tech from just having too much power, I think we have to think about the political concerns and not just the nitty gritty of what would that do for competition and would that really help or make things better?

It's a sort of more macro concern about concentrated power as an evil in itself as a historic danger that we're talking about.

TRISTAN HARRIS - HOST, YOUR UNDIVIDED ATTENTION: It's almost like antitrust should be renamed anti-inequality or anti-populism or anti-fascism, because essentially the concern about concentrated power is not even about the content of what the technology is doing, although there's a relationship there we can get into. But more, just the way that that poses dangers for geopolitical risks, World War Three-type scenarios, not trying to fan the flames of fear, but just that we've seen patterns that create those kinds of risks in the past. And I think, antitrust and big tech and all of that sounds like kind of a boring policy conversation. I often think just for the kind of Frank Luntz sort of view of the world of language, don't call it an estate tax, call it a death tax, 'cause then people get riled up about it. Let's not call it antitrust, let's call it a antifascist sort of move.

How do we prevent these things in consolidated forms of power from getting too dangerous?

TIM WU: Yes, I think that's right. I think the highest and best calling of antitrust, you know, it's an old word and probably a better one would be anti-monopoly or private power control, something like that. And you know, in some ways tech might be--I mean, people are aware of tech it's right in their faces, it seems to have a lot of power. I don't deny that. But some of the other industries can be just as bad. Pharma. Broadband, you know, why do we accept a broadband monopoly? I think broadband does more to--broadband and cell phones, which are both concentrated,--do more to take money from the middle classes. Then you think about the fact that bills are double or triple what they are in other parts of the world. And you think that in its way, is a form of private taxation, just allowing this huge part of the household budget to be hollowed out by any broadband. Be a citizen that is able to be productive and you need a cell phone as well. And we've let those things become this massive part of the household budget and they don't need to be at those prices. The margins are absurd, as anybody takes a careful look knows.

AZA RASKIN: I want to be careful with this next thought, but, as you were talking about the way that monopolies cozy up to government, it did make me once again, return to thinking about Facebook and their policy, which is to say, we will fact check your advertisements unless you're part of the government. If you're a politician, It's all fair game.

TIM WU: Yeah. I have been a critic of Facebook's advertising policy. And the worst version of it, the most terrifying version is that, at the margins, they see doing this as a way to stay in the good graces of government, particularly the current government. And you know, there's a lot of other reasons though, we don't want to.... But they've never explained why they're in this game at all.

I mean, this is one of the questions.

TRISTAN HARRIS - HOST, YOUR UNDIVIDED ATTENTION: Say more about that?

TIM WU: So Facebook runs political advertising, and as you said, allows it to be maliciously false so long as it's political advertising. If it's nonpolitical, if it's like a pill that promises to make you lose a hundred pounds, they won't run that, unless you can back it up. But they will let you run something that says Joe Biden paid Ukraine a billion dollars not to prosecute

his son or something like that. Some straight out lie, as long as it's political. And the worst version of it is the concern that well, the federal government has a lot of ways of hurting Facebook. Facebook wants to get along with them and on the margins, they're like, man, maybe we should just keep running these political ads. 'Cause they could get out of the business of political ads altogether. That's what Twitter's done.

TRISTAN HARRIS - HOST, YOUR UNDIVIDED ATTENTION: And Pinterest and Microsoft and LinkedIn and a host of other companies.

TIM WU: Yeah.

AZA RASKIN: In fact, one of the ways they defend themselves is by saying, Oh, we're not doing this for the money, because look, it makes such a tiny sliver of money compared to the rest of our revenue.

TIM WU: Which I believe, I do believe that some people might be more skeptical, but I believe that.

AZA RASKIN: Well rather it's saying from there, then it's not going to hurt them much to turn it off.

TIM WU: Right. Exactly. But there was some people who are skeptical,, 'Oh, they really want the money,' but I don't think that's right. I think it is at the margin you have this kind of thing in yourself, it's like, well, maybe why make an extra enemy? Why not keep a friend? And...

TRISTAN HARRIS - HOST, YOUR UNDIVIDED ATTENTION: That friend being the Executive Branch.

TIM WU: Being the Executive Branch, this particular White House, which relies on, like no other White House before it, on defamatory and deliberately malicious lies in its advertising. That is, for some reason, their go-to and so, not banning their favorite forms of advertising...

And more generally the whole idea, when you think about it, they have this one company and a bunch of people and their decisions about advertising rules can have such an effect on the presidency that everybody cares about them. They're just these little private rules, no oversight, no public involvement, has more effect than any legislation or anything else.

It's pretty crazy and scary. And the idea, if it's possible, that even they feel any pressure to keep running political ads, I think outlines a cause for concern in a nutshell.

Power and Politics in Silicon Valley ft. Ramesh Srinivasan - The Michael Brooks Show - Air Date 11-10-19

MICHAEL BROOKS - HOST, THE MICHAEL BROOKS SHOW: This should be obvious, but I think it still gets lost a lot in mass discourse. How is technology inseparable from culture and politics and how do they reinforce and inform each other?

RAMESH SRINIVASAN: Yeah. So a couple of quick points. First of all, any technology we create, whether it's an older set of technology, but certainly when it comes to computer technologies or internet technologies or social media technologies, they are always created by people and when people create technologies of any kind, they are expressing, in a sense, their value systems, their forms of indoctrination, their socialization onto those technologies themselves. Much like the way you produce this radio show as a type of technology is based on your own ideas, your own political values, your own cultural values, your own aesthetic values. And you imprint that onto technology itself. So, that's basically a way of saying that technologies are socially, culturally, and politically constructed, and they're wielded, at least implicitly, to those aims.

However, when we're talking about technologies, of course, they're not all the same. And when it comes to these internet, digital technologies, that is a whole qualitative distinction relative to technologies of the past. The technology, what we might call internet technologies, are actually no longer just about going onto the web. They're no longer about our mobile phones. They are the ways by which almost every form increasingly of human experience, both individually, in terms of communications, but also economically, politically and so on are being expressed, right?

So, no longer when you walk around the city, I'm right now in downtown Seattle, this place is very soon going to be a so-called "smart city" with 5G networks and Internet of Things, connectivity. So no longer will we see this place as a non-digital place. It will be a place where digital technologies are embedded within the city itself. Similarly, in very problematic ways, with opportunities or experience or sort of resources people try to access, like insurance. Insurance is going to be algorithmically and computationally determined.

So the point I want to make is that this whole space of digital technology, isn't just about Facebook or Google or what have you, it's more about the question, it's the language by which experiences and opportunities and communications are increasingly being transformed into that language. So that's why it's so damn important to really critique who has power over those languages, who wields those technologies, who monetizes those technologies.

And that is why. this conversation that we're having today, yes it's about technology, but it's actually about power of voice, and I know you've done great reporting on ideology, and hegemony, and those sorts of themes as well.

MICHAEL BROOKS - HOST, THE MICHAEL BROOKS SHOW: Yeah, and I bring your work in my mind, it's in conversation for me, reading your brilliant writing with Cathy O'Neil who wrote this great book, I think it was *Weapons of Math Destruction*, which is a brilliant book putting some of these computational issues and algorithmic issues with regards to class and race, policing, insurance background checks, on the table.

And then also, an anecdote from somebody I've learned a lot from an adjacent but different field a guy by the name of Grant McCracken who wrote a lot of work on the anthropology of corporations. One time I interviewed him for another program years ago, and he said that somebody in Silicon Valley, he said, who is at the end and point of the technology of who's using your product? Who is that person and those people? And the person in Silicon Valley went. The end user?" Just like complete lack of any contextual understanding, of anybody, I

mean even just on like a kind of like market level, let alone the deeper, more serious questions you're raising.

RAMESH SRINIVASAN: You know, why Michael? It's because as engineers we're trained to think of technology as morally agnostic. Right We think that what we're doing, and I have undergraduate and graduate degrees in applied math and machine learning like AI and technology sort of in that sense, but we are taught to think of technology as morally neutral. That our creation of technology is just some sort of linear path towards some sort of dream of innovation, some sort of, apex of the Himalayan mountain of innovation. So we are taught to think of technology in that way, rather than the ways in which we're discussing.

And I'm so honored that you even think of my work in relation to Cathy's work. I'm actually doing my first book release events with her in person in just a few days in New York city. *Beyond the Valley*, the new book. Yeah.

MICHAEL BROOKS - HOST, THE MICHAEL BROOKS SHOW: Everybody beyond the Valley and yes, I think, I think Cathy O'Neil really put these issues on the table. So let's elaborate on that a little bit more. The whole line that you're talking about, the assumption inside engineering, that these are just products, they're technological processes, they're agnostic, they're neutral, they're not political this. I mean, anybody listening to this knows that that's a foolish assumption. One of the things though that I also think is very interesting, that your work points do that I think helps us set some of the answers and countervailing forces you get to, is a really big shift in the public perception of Silicon Valley in the last several years. And it has to do with the rhetoric of decentralization and centralization. That these technologies, when they first came on board, this is the new information economy, it's frictionless, it's decentralized, it empowers people.

I guess there is a small group of people who, even though we're still horrifically dependent on these dangerous platforms, it has opened some interesting career opportunities for. But the vast, bigger, and much larger, larger story is, one, that these companies have an enormous concentration of power over every single aspect of our lives without oversight or regulation, that they are synchronized with the national security state and the labor practices that correspond with that.

So can you tell us precisely how Silicon Valley has become, or maybe always has been the precise inverse of the rhetoric that was used to sell itself?

RAMESH SRINIVASAN: That's such an excellent question. Well, okay. So Silicon Valley has for many decades, and especially the last 20 years since we've seen the growth, just kind of re sprouting of Apple, Google, Facebook, et cetera—about 20 years old approximately—has engaged in an extremely successful branding campaign. And when I say branding, I'm not just talking about advertisements. It's much more about how their technologies are projected ideologically again or culturally onto the world and onto the American consumers.

So, you might be astonished to know that Apple has called, at points, it's retail centers town squares. Facebook calls its technologies, social infrastructures for the global community. Google of course always claims universality and publicness, in its language and its discourse.

So you take that, you tie that with the large scale implicit assumption that all of us have, not just myself, as I said, as a former engineer, that we're just creating efficient, innovative, even

oh, gee, gee, disruptive, wink, wink, disruptive technologies. What you see as a hijacking of discourse. And, whether that's intentional or accidental, that's a product of how people treat technology, but it's also a product of the sort of value systems that are being projected out, though not necessarily the value systems in any sense at all, that are being actually practiced by the technology companies themselves.

So that's one major aspect to your excellent question. The other, which I really appreciate that you brought up, is this whole notion of decentralization and centralization. So. Yeah, this gives me an opportunity to say that first and foremost, the internet was publicly funded as a technology. The internet exists because of government, American taxpayer funding through the advanced research projects agency. The first node of the internet, I described this and *Beyond the Valley*, the new book, the person node of the internet is actually right near my office at UCLA. And the web itself was a nonprofit, a scholarly communication technology that was actually built in Europe.

So these are both nonprofit initiatives, so you kind of have to remember that political economy issue as well. But the internet itself has been mythologized in an assessment, architecturally or geometrically resembles something of a decentralized network. And we love decentralization, it kind of resonates, at least intuitively, with ideas of democracy. It aligns itself with anarchistic value systems that a lot of people on some level really like. Libertarian value systems love this idea of decentralization. Even those of us who love this idea of decentralization, kind of as an intellectual or artistic or even idea of "I can escape power through decentralization". We all got into this idea, cause it felt a lot like books we used to read of rhizomes, like Deleuze's views of the rhizome, or even people talk about how myelial networks are like the internet, which is like the underground, fungal, root structures that exist in decentralized ways underneath the earth's surface. So it's just kind of amazing. Decentralization is a super fetish, you know?

The thing though, is that decentralization can also be controlled if you and I are parts of a decentralized network, but someone is right in the middle monetizing and surveilling and manipulating every peer to peer interaction.

Decentralization can be controlled, not by centralizing it, but by monitoring, manipulating, and getting into the middle of those networks of communication and information exchange. And that is exactly what ended up happening to the so-called open internet. That is the business upon which, Google, Facebook, Airbnb, Uber, etc, etc. They are founded on the model of being the intermediary. The term we often use these days is platform. They are in the middle and they claim their technologies are neutral. You know, they're just allowing us to all connect with one another, but they're right in the middle of grabbing the data and manipulating our experiences and monetizing it for their own private benefits, even when it ends up producing disastrous effects in the larger world. They claim ignorance or agnosticism as a way to get themselves out of this mess, but it's not gonna work anymore because it's just gotten too far out of hand, and that's what I believe.

Yaël Eisenstat: Dear Facebook, this is how you're breaking democracy - TEDTalks - Air Date 9-8-20

YAËL EISENSTAT: Five years ago, it struck me that I was losing the ability to engage with people who aren't like-minded. The idea of discussing hot-button issues with my fellow Americans was starting to give me more heartburn than the times that I engaged with suspected extremists overseas. It was starting to leave me feeling more embittered and frustrated. And so just like that, I shifted my entire focus from global national security threats to trying to understand what was causing this push towards extreme polarization at home. As a former CIA officer and diplomat who spent years working on counterextremism issues, I started to fear that this was becoming a far greater threat to our democracy than any foreign adversary. And so I started digging in, and I started speaking out, which eventually led me to being hired at Facebook and ultimately brought me here today, to continue warning you about how these platforms are manipulating and radicalizing so many of us, and to talk about how to reclaim our public square.

I was a foreign service officer in Kenya just a few years after the September 11th attacks, and I led what some call "hearts and minds" campaigns along the Somalia border. A big part of my job was to build trust with communities deemed the most susceptible to extremist messaging. I spent hours drinking tea with outspoken anti-Western clerics and even dialogued with some suspected terrorists. And while many of these engagements began with mutual suspicion, I don't recall any of them resulting in shouting or insults, and in some cases we even worked together on areas of mutual interest. The most powerful tools we had were to simply listen, learn and build empathy. This is the essence of hearts and minds work, because what I found again and again is that what most people wanted was to feel heard, validated and respected. And I believe that's what most of us want.

So what I see happening online today is especially heartbreaking and a much harder problem to tackle. We are being manipulated by the current information ecosystem, entrenching so many of us so far into absolutism that compromise has become a dirty word. Because right now, social media companies like Facebook profit off of segmenting us and feeding us personalized content that both validates and exploits our biases. Their bottom line depends on provoking a strong emotion to keep us engaged, often incentivizing the most inflammatory and polarizing voices, to the point where finding common ground no longer feels possible. And despite a growing chorus of people crying out for the platforms to change, it's clear they will not do enough on their own. So governments must define the responsibility for the real-world harms being caused by these business models and impose real costs on the damaging effects they're having to our public health, our public square and our democracy. But unfortunately, this won't happen in time for the US presidential election. So I am continuing to raise this alarm, because even if one day we do have strong rules in place, it will take all of us to fix this.

When I started shifting my focus from threats abroad to the breakdown in civil discourse at home, I wondered if we could repurpose some of these hearts and minds campaigns to help heal our divides. Our more than 200-year experiment with democracy works in large part because we are able to openly and passionately debate our ideas for the best solutions. But while I still deeply believe in the power of face-to-face civil discourse, it just cannot compete with the polarizing effects and scale of social media right now. The people who are sucked down these rabbit holes of social media outrage often feel far harder to break of their ideological mindsets than those vulnerable communities I worked with ever were.

So when Facebook called me in 2018 and offered me this role heading its elections integrity operations for political advertising, I felt I had to say yes. I had no illusions that I would fix it all, but when offered the opportunity to help steer the ship in a better direction, I had to at least try. I didn't work directly on polarization, but I did look at which issues were the most divisive in our society and therefore the most exploitable in elections interference efforts, which was Russia's tactic ahead of 2016. So I started by asking questions. I wanted to understand the underlying systemic issues that were allowing all of this to happen, in order to figure out how to fix it.

Now I still do believe in the power of the Internet to bring more voices to the table, but despite their stated goal of building community, the largest social media companies, as currently constructed, are antithetical to the concept of reasoned discourse. There's no way to reward listening, to encourage civil debate and to protect people who sincerely want to ask questions in a business where optimizing engagement and user growth are the two most important metrics for success. There's no incentive to help people slow down, to build in enough friction that people have to stop, recognize their emotional reaction to something, and question their own assumptions before engaging. The unfortunate reality is: lies are more engaging online than truth, and salaciousness beats out wonky, fact-based reasoning in a world optimized for frictionless virality. As long as algorithms' goals are to keep us engaged, they will continue to feed us the poison that plays to our worst instincts and human weaknesses. And yes, anger, mistrust, the culture of fear, hatred: none of this is new in America. But in recent years, social media has harnessed all of that and, as I see it, dramatically tipped the scales. And Facebook knows it. A recent "Wall Street Journal" article exposed an internal Facebook presentation from 2018 that specifically points to the companies' own algorithms for growing extremist groups' presence on their platform and for polarizing their users. But keeping us engaged is how they make their money. The modern information environment is crystallized around profiling us, and then segmenting us into more and more narrow categories to perfect this personalization process. We're then bombarded with information confirming our views, reinforcing our biases, and making us feel like we belong to something. These are the same tactics we would see terrorist recruiters using on vulnerable youth, albeit in smaller, more localized ways before social media, with the ultimate goal of persuading their behavior.

Unfortunately, I was never empowered by Facebook to have an actual impact. In fact, on my second day there, my title and job description were changed and I was cut out of decision-making meetings. My biggest efforts, trying to build plans to combat disinformation and voter suppression in political ads, were rejected. And so I lasted just shy of six months. But here is my biggest takeaway from my time there. There are thousands of people at Facebook who are passionately working on a product that they truly believe makes the world a better place, but as long as the company continues to merely tinker around the margins of content policy and moderation, as opposed to considering how the entire machine is designed and monetized, they will never truly address how the platform is contributing to hatred, division and radicalization. And that's the one conversation I never heard happen during my time there, because that would require fundamentally accepting that the thing you built might not be the best thing for society, and agreeing to alter the entire product and profit model.

So what can we do about this? I'm not saying that social media bears the sole responsibility for the state that we're in today. Clearly, we have deep-seated societal issues

that we need to solve. But Facebook's response, that it is just a mirror to society, is a convenient attempt to deflect any responsibility from the way their platform is amplifying harmful content and pushing some users towards extreme views.

And Facebook could, if they wanted to, fix some of this. They could stop amplifying and recommending the conspiracy theorists, the hate groups, the purveyors of disinformation and, yes, in some cases even our president. They could stop using the same personalization techniques to deliver political rhetoric that they use to sell us sneakers. They could retrain their algorithms to focus on a metric other than engagement, and they could build in guardrails to stop certain content from going viral before being reviewed. And they could do all of this without becoming what they call the arbiters of truth.

But they've made it clear that they will not go far enough to do the right thing without being forced to, and, to be frank, why should they? The markets keep rewarding them, and they're not breaking the law. Because as it stands, there are no US laws compelling Facebook, or any social media company, to protect our public square, our democracy and even our elections. We have ceded the decision-making on what rules to write and what to enforce to the CEOs of for-profit internet companies. Is this what we want? A post-truth world where toxicity and tribalism trump bridge-building and consensus-seeking?

I do remain optimistic that we still have more in common with each other than the current media and online environment portray. And I do believe that having more perspective surface makes for a more robust and inclusive democracy. But not the way it's happening right now. And it bears emphasizing, I do not want to kill off these companies. I just want them held to a certain level of accountability, just like the rest of society.

It is time for our governments to step up and do their jobs of protecting our citizenry. And while there isn't one magical piece of legislation that will fix this all, I do believe that governments can -- and must -- find the balance between protecting free speech and holding these platforms accountable for their effects on society. And they could do so in part by insisting on actual transparency around how these recommendation engines are working, around how the curation, amplification and targeting are happening.

You see, I want these companies held accountable, not for if an individual posts misinformation or extreme rhetoric, but for how their recommendation engines spread it, how their algorithms are steering people towards it, and how their tools are used to target people with it. I tried to make change from within Facebook and failed, and so I've been using my voice again for the past few years to continue sounding this alarm and hopefully inspire more people to demand this accountability.

My message to you is simple: pressure your government representatives to step up and stop ceding our public square to for-profit interests. Help educate your friends and family about how they're being manipulated online. Push yourselves to engage with people who aren't like-minded. Make this issue a priority. We need a whole-society approach to fix this.

And my message to the leaders of my former employer Facebook is this: Right now, people are using your tools exactly as they were designed, to sow hatred, division and distrust, and you're not just allowing it, you are enabling it. And yes, there are lots of great stories of positive things happening on your platform around the globe, but that doesn't make any of this OK. And it's only getting worse as we're heading into our election, and even more

concerning, face our biggest potential crisis yet, if the results aren't trusted, and if violence breaks out.

So when in 2021 you once again say, "We know we have to do better," I want you to remember this moment, because it's no longer just a few outlier voices. Civil rights leaders, academics, journalists, advertisers, your own employees, are shouting from the rooftops that your policies and your business practices are harming people and democracy. You own your decisions, but you can no longer say that you couldn't have seen it coming.

Thank you.

Summary

JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT: We've just heard clips today, starting with Democracy Now!, discussing how Facebook has destructive externalities, just like industry has toxic waste spells. On the Media looked at Facebook's role in spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories about COVID-19. Your Undivided Attention discussed the recent advertiser boycott of Facebook. We heard a small clip from The Social Dilemma about the destructive nature of Facebook's business model. And I cannot stress enough, how much I encourage everyone to watch The Social Dilemma in full on Netflix. Your Undivided Attention discussed the nature of concentrated control over society's mode of communication and where that can lead.

Now, all of that was available to everyone, but I'm experimenting with a new method of delivering bonus content to members. So members already heard two additional clips right here in the show that everyone else missed out on. There was a clip from The Michael Brooks Show hosting a conversation about the nature of Silicon Valley and how the business model of being the intermediary turned the wide open web into a series of big tech fiefdoms.

And secondly, there was a TedTalk from a former foreign service officer and Facebook insider, who describes why it was easier to speak with outspoken anti-Western clerics and suspected terrorists in Kenya than to communicate across political lines on Facebook in the US, and why her efforts to reform Facebook from the inside failed.

For nonmembers, those bonus clips are still linked in the show notes and they are part of the transcript for today's episode. So you can still find it if you make the effort, but to hear those clips and all of our bonus content delivered seamlessly into your podcast feed as part of regular episodes, sign up to support the show at BestoftheLeft.com/support or request a financial hardship membership. Every request is granted, no questions asked. Let money be no barrier to accessing additional content from the show.

And now we'll hear from you.

Mythology - Alan from Connecticut

CALLER: ALAN FROM CONNECTICUT: Hey, Jay!, It's Alan from Connecticut, calling in responding to Erin's voicemail on mythology, etc. Actually first heard it on the Patreon app with the text underneath overlying the voice. It was pretty awesome and it was a really cool

way to do that and, kudos to that. So actually I was walking, I could barely hear, but I could read along and so that was great.

But I've been struggling to respond to this for a couple of days to try not to be a Debbie Downer. When I think of mythology and, I've been thinking about this a lot, but I haven't done any research, most mythology, Greek mythology, other mythologies, they always talk about rising above of and fighting against something. And that is always a polarization, where you're overcoming, usually another group of people or another God or another thing, right? It's not usually, and maybe I'm wrong and maybe I'm just not exposed to mythology that shows people working hand in hand. And I'd love to see the mythology of the United States, and the stories of myth and the reality of the United States kind of rewritten, but I don't know how you do that in a country where polarization is so incredibly strong, whether it be politics or sports. I mean, all you need to do is go to a sports bar and look at the two sides screaming and yelling at each other. And, I'm just not sure how to do that. Like to even begin to conceptualize what that mythology might look like. I think it'd be fantastic. I'd love for everyone to sit around holding hands and being able to sing together, but is this people that can even do that? I mean, I don't know, I don't know.

So not to be a Debbie Downer, but that's kind of what goes through my head and that's kind of what I struggle with. So, love to hear what other people think about what that could look like, forget about how we get there, but what would that look like? What do you envision when you think about a rewritten mythology story for the United States?

Thanks. Stay awesome. Where a mask.

Final comments on the two major changes happening to the show Part 1

JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT: Thanks for listening to everyone. Thanks to Deon Clark and Erin Clayton for their research work on the show. Thanks to the monosyllabic transcriptionist trio, Ben, Dan, and Ken for their work helping put our transcripts together. Thanks to Amanda Hoffman for all of her work on our social media outlets and activism segments. And thanks to all those who called into the voicemail line. If you'd like to leave a comment or question of your own to be played on the show, you can send us a voice memo by email or simply record a message at 202-999-3991.

So, as I said at the beginning, we have two major new features / changes to the show happening today. It was an utter coincidence; I just came up with these two ideas close together, and they're both being implemented today. So, the first, as I explained briefly, members get extra-long shows, and for non-members I'm actually going to shrink it down a little bit. I'm aiming for maybe like 40 minutes of clips, plus all the voicemails and comments and my final thoughts at the end, making it just like an hour long show. I think that's what regular listeners expect from an occasional, weekly or biweekly show. About an hour long is normal for people. And so, I actually hope new listeners will have an easier time diving in. If they see it's an hour, that's a normal show. If they look and they see out it's an hour and 20 minutes, Ooh, that's a long show. And so, I want to make it accessible to new listeners, totally feature-packed for everyone, 40 minutes of content plus the final wrap-up with

voicemails and all that as normal, but in an hour-long package instead of hour and 20 minutes.

And then for members who want more, they get more, as they have been getting more for a long time just in a slightly different package, combined with the new feature I have which is the financial hardship memberships, meaning money is no longer an excuse. If you want the extra content and you can't afford it, it doesn't matter. Now you can have it.

So, that is the first update of the day, but the second update is really off-the-wall. So, I was talking to the members on a bonus episode recently about this multi-year mystery I've been grappling with about why voicemail numbers have been dropping. Ten years ago, it was easy for me to play a half dozen voicemails per episode. These days, if I get one to three emails a week, that's great. I feel lucky to have gotten three voicemails. And so, I was discussing this on the members' show, and Kim wrote in and gave her thoughts. Kim writes, I just wanted to mention that I think the reason fewer people do voicemails now is the same reason fewer people make phone calls. Now there are just so many other venues and forums where people can talk and discuss in writing, and you get responses from other people right away. You don't have to wait a week for your message to appear on the show and then another week for the responses, etc. It's just simply cumbersome now, and people don't bother.

I don't know if that's what's going on with listeners. I've had a whole slew of theories: that, back in the Obama years, people were more excited about politics and wanting to talk about it and now they're depressed; or the topics I used to cover were a little bit more broad, a little bit more simple, and the stuff I cover now might be a little more niche, a little bit more complex, so, maybe people have less to say now than they did then. But I'm starting to think that all those theories were wrong, and that something Kim said sparked the idea of what's really happening. Fewer people make phone calls now across the board for all reasons. As a society, we have been trained that you can do pretty much anything without having to make a phone call, lots of things that you could only do previously by making phone calls. And that got me thinking about not just that societal trend but what's called phone phobia which exhibits itself in a whole range of ways from extreme to mild. But even a mild version of phone phobia could be enough to make you not call into a voicemail to a podcast because people don't like talking on the phone. They definitely don't like speaking publicly, and calling in a voicemail to a public podcast is kind of like a combination of the two of those things. So, you can understand the hesitancy people would have, and phone phobia is generational. The younger generation has it at a much greater degree than older generations. So, you can see how this trend might play out in a voicemail section on a podcast where I get 10% of the voicemails that I used to get 10 years ago.

So, it's an interesting phenomenon, but then what's the result of that? Whose voices then get to be heard in a political conversation based around voicemails? I coined a term today. I called it the 'Alanification' of the voicemail segment. Alan, who we unsurprisingly heard from today, calls in all the time. He's a super nice guy, super supportive of the show. Really outgoing, totally goofy, and apparently has no compunction whatsoever calling in and leaving voicemails, giving his political thoughts, saying a bunch of goofy stuff, joking around. And so, because that is his personality type, he has no problem calling into the voicemail line. But then, that's what we're left with, that people who have the right kind of personality are the only ones who get to be part of the conversation. Alan is just the extreme version of that, and I think he might even agree with that assessment. It's certainly not a criticism.

There is nothing wrong with him, it's just that he happens to be let's say blessed with the personality that is conducive to calling in to the voicemail line of a podcast, for whatever that's worth.

So, then I had an idea: to use a feature of my fancy new transcription software, and this feature is only a few weeks old. They just released a slate of synthetic voices that can say whatever you want them to say for whatever reason you might want them to say it. Talk about living in a simultaneous utopia and dystopia. So, for lack of a better term, I'm calling it an e-voicemail. And my first thought -- I had this idea; I ran a little experiment with it. My first thought was about all the drawbacks: these voices are not perfect yet. Obviously they sound human-ish, but they sometimes slip into the uncanny valley just a little bit. So I worried what people would think. Would they be really annoyed with putting these robot voices -- I mean, they are better robot voices than having your computer read text to you. They sound a lot more humanistic than that, but would people be irritated by it conceptually? Would they be irritated by it auditorially? There could be any number of things, any number of problems that people would have about it.

But then, I thought more deeply about the upsides. So, people don't like talking on the phone; they don't like public speaking. We addressed that. I also mentioned that this is a generational phenomenon. And so if older people are more likely to be willing to call in, then that just means we only get to hear from older people, and we hear far less from younger generations. That seems like a big blind spot we're creating for ourselves. There has been a perpetual gender gap in the voicemail section, and it doesn't take too much imagination to understand that socialization has encouraged more men than women to be proudly outspoken with their opinions over the years. But that gender gap does not seem to exist in the emails that I receive. Also, politics is simply complicated and nuanced. I don't need to tell you that, you know that. And so people wants to be sure to say exactly what they mean and to not misspeak out of forgetfulness or nervousness or whatever. I've heard from people for years and years and years by email. They write in and say, I'm writing you an email because I want to make sure I get my thoughts right. Whereas if I left a voicemail I'm worried I wouldn't say what I mean. Others have just said they simply can't call, that the need to write their thoughts is so strong that they feel not worried they might misspeak but unable to put their thoughts together when speaking, and they really need to be able to write it down. Nothing wrong with that; it's just the way some people are. So, are the robot voices odd? A little offputting? Yeah, of course they are. But does the upside of opening up the conversation to countless new voices with unique and interesting perspectives outweigh the downside? I certainly think that it does, and I hope that you agree.

Here are the first three emails that I've received recently that you never would have heard about. You never would have heard from these people. You wouldn't have heard their comments or their nuanced thoughts if not for e-voicemails. So, first with a little caveat, I guess you did hear from Zach a little bit. I did read his email and I read a tiny bit of his response, but you get a lot more out of it when you hear from it in full.

So, Zach the theologian wrote in asking for my thoughts on voting idealistically for the Green party or fearfully for Biden, and I gave my take on a previous episode, and these are the responses that I received by email only, no responses by voicemail.

Response to Zach the theologian - Nicole

E-Voicemail: Nicole: Hi Jay, this is Nicole. I have a couple of thoughts on your final comments to Zach for this episode. I agree with your comments about voting as a tool for change rather than emotionally. Rachel Maddow puts it this way: "Vote with your heart in the primary, vote with your head in November".

E-Voicemail: Nicole: Privilege is a trigger word for many, but the fact is that voting third party, especially in this election, is a privilege. Every marginalized group has suffered in one way or another under this administration, not to mention the thousands who have lost their lives due to his policies. More will suffer and more will die if he is reelected. Voting for someone you know can't win for idealistic reasons, ignores that reality. In November, vote for the candidate who has a chance of winning and who will do the most good. I also wanted to comment on your use of "Voting for the lesser of two evils". Please stop using this phrase. I have never voted for an ideal candidate and neither has anyone else. Even if Zach votes for the Green Party candidate, I am sure there are some differences between what he wants and what their policies are. Using this old trope implies that there is an ideal candidate.

The concept of "Voting for the lesser of two evils" also implies that both candidates are evil. This gives people an excuse not to go out and vote.

I don't know about you, but I heard a lot of: "It doesn't matter, they are the same," during 2016.

I would like to suggest using: "I am voting for the better person." Say what you like about Biden, he is without a doubt the better person.

Thanks for a great show. I have cut back significantly on my news consumption, yours is one of the few shows I still follow. Stay well.

Your argument convinced me - Zach the theologian

E-Voicemail: Zach the Theologian: Hello Jay, this is Zach the Theologian!

I was chuffed to hear you respond to my email in your most recent podcast! I wanted to let you know how successful your reasoning was.

You were right to point out that I was seeing my vote as an expression of my feelings. I had thought that voting for Hawkins would somehow trumpet to the world that this was my vision for the world! "This is how I think the world should be!" However, if I exercise my ability to be objective and distance myself from the decision, it becomes clear how useless such a scream into the void would be. Practically speaking, my vote would initiate no noticeable change in the world. Utilizing your methodology of a theory of change, however, I can see how a vote for Biden is the first step in the direction toward someday being able to actually vote for someone like Hawkins. It does still hurt a little to think that someone like Hawkins, or Sanders, is not able to be voted into office right now, but that is the world in which we live.

I also really appreciate your clarification and appeal that this is the first step, that Biden is by no means the end of our journey to change our country for the better. This type of language and vision helps me feel better about participating on behalf of Biden.

I also wanted you to know that I was in no way offended or put off by your rejection of my premise that voting is either fearful or idealistic. That is how I felt in the moment that I wrote that email, and I wrote to you in the hopes you could help me out of it, and you did. So thanks again for that.

I now wonder if I would be an even better advocate for Biden, armed with your theory of change and my own experience about wanting to vote for Hawkins. I can't volunteer to help with voting as I have high-risk individuals in my home, but I can certainly tell my network of friends family and colleagues virtually about why I am now supporting Biden even though I don't agree with all of his policies.

Thank you for engaging with me, and I look forward to continuing to listen and support you and your team in your work.

Final comments on the two major changes happening to the show Part 2

JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT: And this last message is in response to the much-talked-about episode, "*How a system of power defends itself.*"

White Male Privilege - Heidi

E-Voicemail: Heidi: Hi Jay, this is Heidi!

Thank you for all the work you do to inform your listeners! I love your show.

In your most recent episode, episode 1358 was mentioned, and I hadn't listened to it yet, so I went ahead and did so. It was FASCINATING. Not only in how Mounk portrays Robin out of context, but also in Tom's reaction.

Tom's reaction is the reaction from so many white men that I've personally experienced, either in conversation with people at work, or even in online comment sections. It makes my skin crawl.

For context, I'm a white woman, and I've tried to examine my own relationship to privilege and educate myself on how I can be a better ally. I remember that the first time I truly understood, as best I can, as a white woman, racism, and was able to empathize with Black people in America, was when I experienced discrimination at work via sexism. My boss plainly said that certain colleagues were being given sales accounts because they were men with children, while the single women and gay man on the team were passed over, and the one woman who just had a baby on the team was told they were going to take accounts away from her because she needed to take care of her baby and her plate was full. It was unbelievable. Having experienced that helped me understand discrimination more broadly. White men, however, have nothing in their lives that can help them empathize with those who experience racism and discrimination. Here I mean white men generally, I know not all men are like this. When faced with it, they often, as you said, DARVO, and fail to even listen to the idea that they may be a part of systemic racism, or they give examples of hardships they believe they've faced, while completely misunderstanding how privilege works. They do

not believe in privilege, because that would challenge their place in society and everything they think they've "earned". To those in power, equality often feels like oppression. I experience this the most with white conservative men. Just hearing Tom speak, brought back all the childish, gross, ignorant white men like him that I've experienced, that coincidentally constantly interrupt and talk over me like Tom did to Robin, even after asking her a question. But I believe it stems from them having no place of shared experience to reach into, that would enable them to empathize. It frightens me because white men are the ones who have the most power in our country. How do you convince someone to believe in something that they've never seen or experienced in any way themselves? I think it's a huge obstacle to progress.

Again, thank you for all the work you do and for always helping me expand my ideas in a meaningful way on various topics!

Final comments on the two major changes happening to the show Part 3

JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT: So if you'd like to send a message to be played on the show, there's no special process. Just email me, Jay@BestoftheLeft.com and try to keep your message to around 300 words. That's a good amount of time. If a little bit over, it's not a big deal. I'll take it from there.

Now look. Am I helping to lull us into a sense of acceptance of the inevitable robot takeover? Maybe. Am I hastening the trend of people only being able to communicate through text rather than by speaking to one another? Frankly, I think that ship has sort of already sailed and I'm just adapting to that new reality. Now, can I technically make these robot voices say anything I want them to, and therefore edit any voicemail or comment you send to me and make it sound like you're saying something didn't? Yeah, of course. Do I promise to not do that? Yeah, of course.

So as always, keep the comments coming in, either at (202) 999-3991, or by emailing me at Jay@Bestofleft.com.

That is going to be it for today. Thanks to everyone for listening. Thanks to those who support the show by becoming a member or purchasing gift memberships at BestoftheLeft.com/support as that is absolutely how the program survives. Of course, everyone can support the show just by telling everyone you know about it, and leaving us glowing reviews on Apple podcasts and Facebook to help others find the show. For details on the show itself, including links to all of the sources and music used in this and every episode, all that information can always be found in the show notes on the blog and likely right on the device you're using to listen.

So coming to you from far outside the conventional wisdom of Washington, DC, my name is Jay!, and this has been The Best of the left podcast coming to you twice weekly, thanks entirely to the members and donors to the show from BestoftheLeft.com.