

### A Critique on 'The Social Dilemma'

The Social Dilemma is a documentary on the negative effects the advent of social media platforms has had on our society. Produced in 2020 by Larissa Rhodes and directed by Jeff Orlowski, the documentary follows the accounts of multiple individuals who have worked in different influential positions within the world of social media. There is also a fictional story running parallel to the accounts about the lives of different characters negatively affected by social media. The documentary was number one on Netflix in September 2020, becoming the first documentary to reach this coveted milestone.

The Social Dilemma covers a myriad of different points about the sinister world inside the management of social media. The many speakers brought in to provide this information suggest that companies like Twitter and Facebook owe their success to the fact that they can capture our attention for extended periods of time, which can then be sold to the highest bidder, they talk about how different companies integrate addiction inducing techniques and targeted advertising methods into these social platforms in order to keep users engaged for the highest possible amounts of time. Former Google design ethicist Tristan Harris stated in the documentary, 'If you're not playing for the product, you are the product', this quote in itself reaches out to the viewers and stands out as a very powerful statement in what the concept of 'social media' really is. The idea put forward in the documentary when talking about the algorithms is essentially that when one is in a distracted state, like scrolling through Twitter, Snapchat or Instagram, one becomes much more vulnerable to targeted advertising, like how your phone will record if you have been searching for a certain product, the product of which you will then see advertised on your Facebook wall. Harris spoke on the addiction techniques built into the design of the social network platforms, comparing them to Las Vegas slot machines.

This comparative concept 'Vegas' effect was backed up in a study by Mike Brooks, Ph.D. in Psychology Today, stating how, in the same way a slot machine will release a small jackpot every now and then, providing a gambling addict with a small amount of dopamine, making them want more, one can spend hours sadly scrolling through social media, but should one of their tweets get retweeted, or an Instagram picture receive a like, they get that same small amount of dopamine and go back wanting more. This effect is seemingly passive in our everyday lives, we always want to know if something new has happened, and so, on average, a person will check their phone 262 times a day.

One of the main points that the speakers in the documentary and that the fictitious story try to get across is that all these social media platforms are not the benevolent tools many may perceive them to be but rather a marketing scheme constantly working to pull us in for more commercialism. Harris speaks about how in the algorithms in these different social media companies, there are three primary goals: engagement, to pull users in and attract them to the site; growth, to encourage users to keep coming back and perhaps bring their friends and family, and advertising, to make sure the platform is making as much money off of each individual user as is possible. This point is put across rather well in the fictional scenes where the algorithm is people inside the phones forcing different advertisements and social media updates on the characters in order to keep them on their phones.

One of the other issues The Social Dilemma tackles is the issue of artificial intelligence and how it is used to govern what happens on many different social media platforms. Due to the sheer number of users, real people can't review the billions of posts on Facebook or Twitter, for example. The professionals in the documentary talk about how, whilst one can program an AI with a base set of instructions, it can't consider things like morality. Cathy O'Neil, another speaker, mentions how 'people talk about AI as if it will know truth', which, of course, it can't; she argues that AI cannot

solve the problem of fake news and conspiracies being pushed, in fact, the opposite. Many AIs, such as the ones that are used to run YouTube and Facebook, have been known to suggest fake news and conspiracy theory 'rabbit holes' for users to go down once they show a little bit of interest in one conspiracy theory, which in turn leads to the perpetuation of these theories. Harris talks about how AIs will, as the future comes, become better at knowing what keeps us on our phones and learn how to keep our attention on social media platforms for longer amounts of time.

The documentary also talks about how increased exposure to social media has many negative effects on mental health, and this is, in fact, backed up by a study from California State University, which found that individuals who visited social media platforms at least 58 times per week were three times more likely to feel socially isolated and depressed. Much like how platforms like Instagram have perpetuated anxiety in many people due to the impossible beauty standards put forward through filters.

In my opinion, the documentary was well constructed and produced, and many good points were made that I myself could relate to; I, too, have been led down 'rabbit holes' by YouTube before, and I too have felt social anxiety from platforms like Instagram and Snapchat. The experts were clear and well-spoken and provided much-needed insights into the dark heart of social media. I thought the acting in the fictional segments of the documentary was a little cringey at times but, nevertheless, still relevant to the context. The idea of 'ethical platform design' put forward was a little vague, however. Whilst the documentary was a very good step to increasing much-needed awareness on an important subject, the solutions put forward could have been made clearer so a final message on what exactly can be done about said problems could be seen by viewers as a possible thing to work towards.

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