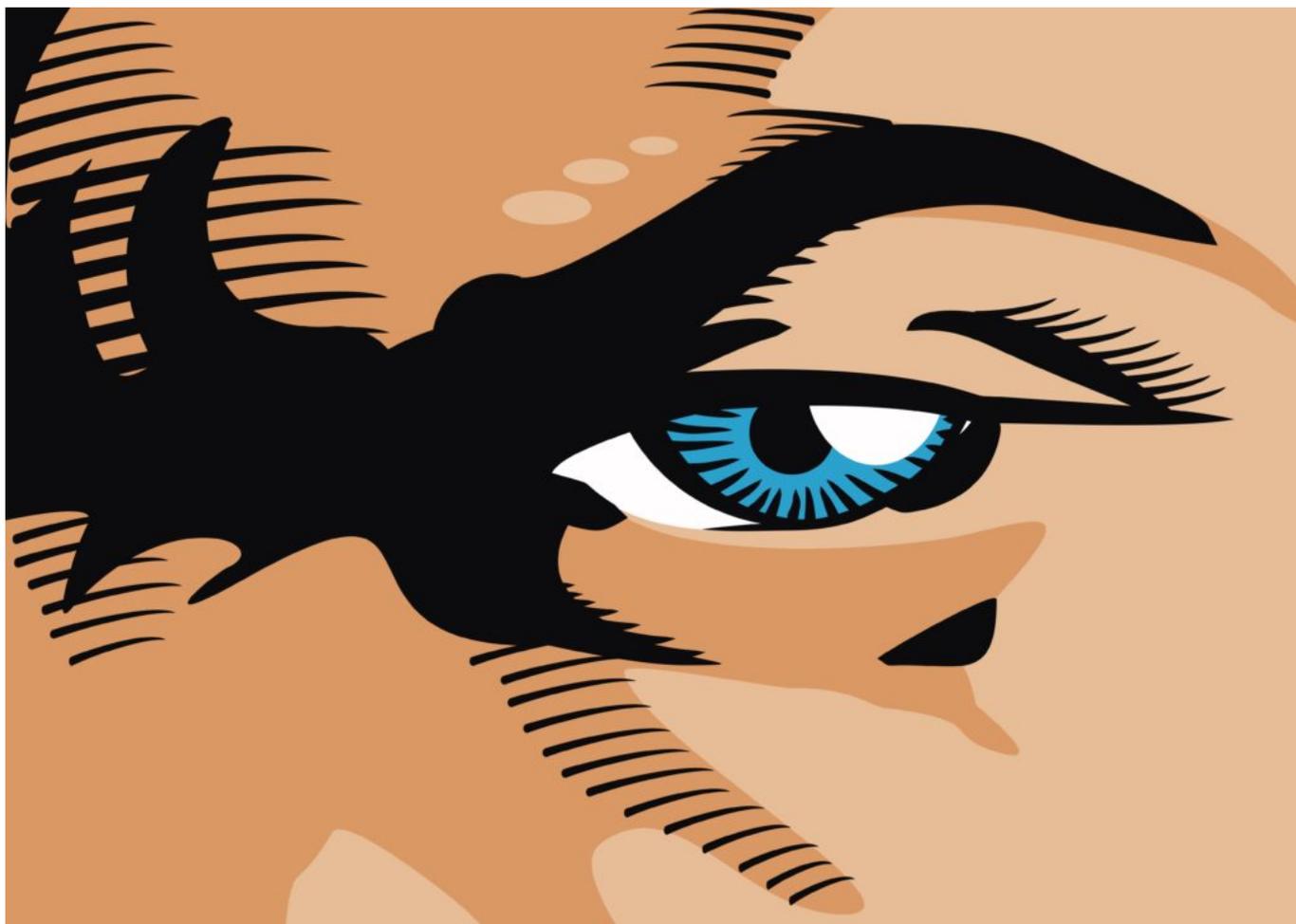


The Social Dilemma: A Documentary and Big Tech's Grasp Over Us



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On Wednesday, October 28, 2020, the Senate committee held a hearing with Big Tech CEOs Jack Dorsey of Twitter, CEO Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook and CEO Sundar Pichai of Alphabet Inc., Google.

The hearing was called, "*Does Section 230's Sweeping Immunity Enable Big Tech Bad Behavior*" which focused on Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act. Section 230 says that **"No**

provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider;" a legal protection against sharing third-party content.

Since Section 230 was enacted into law in 1996, Republicans and Democrats believe it should be modified to more closely represent where the industry is today. The key takeaways were divisive content, fact-checking, censorship, anti-conservative bias, data privacy, antitrust, the abuse of power, misinformation, local news, security and more.

With the election only five days away, several Democrats accused Republicans of deliberating holding the hearing so close to the election to impact it; while Republicans countered with the need to reign in Big Tech.

Top news organizations reported that it was "a sham," that there were "few direct hits on these companies," "this is nonsense," and "have yet to result in anything concrete." For more in-depth coverage, please go to Axios.

While there have already been several Congressional hearings about technology companies within the last several years, including in July 2020 and in October 2020 when The Department of Justice filed an antitrust suit against Google.

But, what has this all led to? If you watch two documentaries, "The Great Hack" and "The Social Dilemma." you'll gain a deeper understanding of what these companies know about us and how our data is being used against us. And, how everything we do is being tracked both online and offline, even when we're sleeping. And, as I've learned, it's scary.

How often do you receive spam calls? Do you worry that your smart devices and cell phones are listening to your conversations? Is your inbox inundated with ads? Are you concerned about the use of facial recognition technology and geolocation targeting?

While many agree that our personal data shouldn't be used to track our activities or sold to advertisers without our knowledge, people feel data privacy is too scary to think about, too complex or just so overwhelming that there's nothing we can do to change it.

In 2018, we learned about how Cambridge Analytica harvested data from millions of Facebook accounts, triggering investigations into the unethical use of personal data by Facebook, Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and the UK Brexit vote.

At that time, Ex-Cambridge Analytica staffer Brittany Kaiser's documentary, *The Great Hack*, illustrated how our data is being tracked, harvested and used against us. One of the core themes is how we leave our data footprint for others to access and follow daily. Other documentaries on the subject include *Screened Out* and *Lo and Behold: Reveries of the Connected World*.

From the credit card swipes we make, to the identities of our friends and families, to our pictures, videos, online activities and more, Big Tech companies track users' behavior to target ads to us. If you'd like to learn more about the basics of data privacy, please read, "In Our Digital World, You Are Being Followed," from September 2019.

A new Netflix documentary, *The Social Dilemma* was released on September 9, 2020, featuring the Center for Humane Technology's founders, advisors and technology leaders. The opening screen shows a quote from Sophocles, "Nothing vast enters the life of mortals without a curse."

Without giving away any spoilers, this movie differs from the others mentioned in that insiders from the technology industry who worked at Facebook, Instagram, Apple, YouTube, Google, Twitter, Palm, Mozilla Labs, Pinterest, the developer of Google Drive, Gmail Chat, Facebook Pages and Facebook's Like

button, among others, speak directly about their experiences.

The dialogue is raw, with executives who appear to be hesitant when answering questions. Their descriptions are apologetic and honest about why they chose to leave these companies. They express ethical issues and concerns that tech is no longer being used for the good of society among other problems.

Tim Kendall, CEO of Moment and former President of Pinterest and former Director of Monetization of Facebook, said, "It's easy to forget today that these trolls have created meaningful systemic changes happening around the world because of these platforms that were positive. I think we were naïve about the other side of the coin."

While he was at Facebook, Kendall was hired to come up with the business model for the company. He and his monetization team decided, "Advertising was the most elegant way."

When the narrator of *The Social Dilemma* asks, "What is the problem?" there are hesitations. These are hard answers to articulate, some of which include:

1. Fake news
2. How social media is negatively affecting children
3. How we've gone from the information age to the disinformation age
4. How capitalism has come to shape our politics and culture in ways that people don't understand and didn't anticipate
5. How to handle the pandemic in the age of fake news
6. How social media has eroded the fabric of our society

Tristan Harris, co-founder of the Center for Humane Technology and former Google Design Ethicist, says we need a new agenda for technology. "If you ask people what's wrong with technology, they'll reference, scandals, grievances, tech addiction, data being stolen, fake news, polarization and hackers."

“The problem should not just be privy to tech people, but to everyone. The tech industry has lost its way. Never before in history have 50 designers, 20-35-year-old white guys, made decisions that would have an impact on two billion people,” Harris added.

Aza Raskin, co-founder of the Center for Humane Technology, former head of User Experience at Mozilla, lead designer of the Firefox browser and inventor of the infinite scroll said, “Advertisers are the customers; we’re the thing that’s being sold.”

In November 2018, I wrote my first column for Equities called, “Has the ‘Public’ Lost Trust in Big Tech Companies?” I called some friends on Wall Street who spoke about the FAANG stocks.

After a random survey of roughly 200 people at the time, only one person said, Google is a tech company. Other respondents said Google (owned by Alphabet) is a search firm, Facebook is a social media platform, Amazon is for online purchases, Apple is for purchasing phones, computers and other devices, and Netflix is a streaming service.

It was remarkable that so few consumers seemed unaware that these were technology companies at heart.

Consider Amazon as a primary example. In its quarter ended June 30, 2020, the company reported net income of \$5.243 billion. That wasn’t just from books and Prime subscriptions. Amazon Web Services, the not-so-humble cloud computing platform subsidiary, generated \$3.357 billion of the bottom line – 64%!

The public at large got one of the first glimpses behind the curtain during the daylong testimony by CEOs in the Big Tech antitrust hearing before Congress on July 29, 2020.

Listening to the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Antitrust, Commercial and Administrative Law grill Apple’s Tim Cook,

Amazon's Jeff Bezos, Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg and Google's Sundar Pichai was disturbing. If you didn't watch or read about it, the core issues were market domination, whether Big Tech should be broken-up, the need for Federal antitrust regulations, privacy protection, data collection practices and efforts to thwart competition.

On July 31, 2020, two days after the hearing, a survey by Harris Poll for Fast Company of 1,020 American adults revealed that nearly half of 18 to 34-year-olds said their perception of tech giants improved and 63 percent said that their usage of the companies' products and services increased.

Overall, however, Americans are still extremely uncomfortable with the Big Four's business models, which are built on the backs of user data. Though nearly all Americans (86%) use services like Amazon and Instagram, and 75% access them daily, only 9% feel that it is "completely worth it" to give up the personal demographic and preferences information that these companies sell to marketers.

In my article, *In Our Digital World, You Are Being Followed*, I asked the same questions of you: Armed with this knowledge, what are you going to do? Start reading the terms and conditions? Delete apps? Stop using Facebook? Debate the need for personalized ads?

You do have control, but the decision centers around what tech conveniences you're willing to give up versus protecting your privacy.

As for me, I've turned off Alexa because I know my device is listening to my conversations. I've removed myself from many Facebook Groups and barely post on Facebook or Instagram. I turn off the news except during important world events. I continue to use Google to search, but am selective about the publications I read.

I stay updated on business and industry trends by reading

industry websites, Twitter and Facebook posts, but I've set boundaries for COVID-19 updates since the information is constantly changing. I feel more in control and less stressed. While my actions are limited, even small changes do make a difference, and I sleep better knowing that Big Tech isn't watching me around the clock like Truman Burbank..



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