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The Social Dilemma

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Abstract

This is a film review of *The Social Dilemma* (2020) directed by Jeff Orlowski.

Keywords

Author Notes

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The Social Dilemma (2020) dir. Jeff Orlowski

The Social Dilemma is a documentary which interviews executives and programmers who left social media sites such as Pinterest, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter for ethical reasons. It treads the familiar ground that you might expect about the addictiveness of social media, however, it does give in-depth information about how the artificial intelligence works.

Tristan Harris, co-founder of the Centre for Humane Technology and previous Google employee, figures prominently in the film. He has spoken widely on the topic of attention and how, what companies are paying for, is user attention. Social media is designed to exploit what these reformers call human weakness. Other media that exploit human weakness have been policed—the common example is Saturday morning cartoons, where the type of advertisers were regulated—but social media has not been regulated in this way.

Experts discuss how by using their AI, videos are recommended based on your previous interactions on a site (such as YouTube) and how it builds a profile of what you may be interested

in or consider. For example, a person interested in flat earth videos may receive other recommendations about conspiracy theories, fake news, anti-vaccination movements, and chem trails. This is how Pizzagate happened, because information was circulating about a conspiracy theory that a pizza parlour was using cheese pizza (CP) as a codeword for child pornography, and that children were held hostage in a pizzeria. A man who was influenced by these social media hoaxes entered the pizzeria where this was supposedly happening, armed, with the goal of freeing the children held there.

Another example is given of how in Myanmar, Facebook was used to incite violence and hate speech and played a strong role in a genocide. But another concern is how, in many countries, Facebook and other social media sites can create polarization, because a watched item leads to another similar item and excludes alternate opinions, as advertisers pay for your attention and ad impressions. Therefore, showing you content like that which you have already seen and liked or watched (which the site records) keeps you online longer. At the same time, it may drive you into more and more narrow viewpoints and exclude any opinions which challenge your own. The film makes it very clear that it can be easy to radicalize people because of the way the AI operates.

The documentary could provide some great opportunities to talk about these issues, especially in an inter-generational situation, as it steps beyond simply critiquing social media and into some concrete contexts that show that it is not simply addictive, but actively dangerous. One surprising fact is that the AI largely acts on its own, and so videos and content is shown to users regardless of its negative impact or verity.

On the negative side, the documentary employs a couple of technical forms which do not really add to the argument, although I suppose they may help middle and high school students understand the content better. These are a dramatic script which shows a family struggling with

phone usage, and another portion which shows one member of this family as an avatar in the internet. Regardless, the content is useful, the experts are knowledgeable, and their message is clear: they want social media to be more ethically designed, and fear the impact on society if things continue the way they are.