

The Social Dilemma: The “curse” of social media

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Directed by Jeff Orlowski; screenplay by Orlowski, Davis Coombe, and Vickie Curtis

The Social Dilemma is a docudrama hybrid directed by Jeff Orlowski and written by Orlowski, Davis Coombe and Vickie Curtis. The film explores, according to its creators, “how social media is reprogramming civilization” in a dangerous direction.

Nearly two dozen technologists, researchers and activists, including former executives and employees of Google, Mozilla, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Apple are interviewed.

The overall tenor is immediately set as the movie opens with a menacing quote by Sophocles: “Nothing vast enters the life of mortals without a curse.”

Various tech experts weigh in on the fact that social media “erodes the fabric of how society works” and “hacks people’s psychology.” The film’s website trumpets its contention that “the technology that connects us...also divides us, controls us, distracts us, monetizes us, manipulates us, polarizes us,” giving “bad actors the tools to sow unrest and fuel political divisions.”

Images flash across the screen: the massacre of the Rohingya people in Myanmar egged on by xenophobic bloggers; fascists threatening the Michigan state capital in April; and various unidentified protests. Also labeled as “bad actors” are the governments of Russia and China.

This conflating of nationalist mass murder, on the one hand, and mass political opposition, especially of the left-wing variety that largely predominates today, on the other, leads...to calls for voluntary or involuntary suppression of social media.

The various figures interviewed make a series of sweeping and sometimes outlandish statements, intended to stir up a nervous, susceptible middle-class

audience. For example, they assert that “technology overpowers [human] weakness” leading to a terrifying “radicalization” (which sort of radicalization?) and that “Facebook as a tool is effective for dictatorships to control the population” (is that all it has done or could do?).

The Social Dilemma’s central interviewee is Tristan Harris, former Google “design ethicist” and co-founder of the Center for Humane Technology. His approach to solving the “existential threat” of “technology’s ability to bring out the worst in society,” as one commentator puts it, was indicated by his appearance before a June 2019 US Senate hearing titled “Optimizing for Engagement: Understanding the Use of Persuasive Technology on Internet Platforms.”

Reasoning that “we are all the lab rats”—i.e., the helpless, defenseless victims—of the tech companies, as one talking head asserts, Harris and others like him appeal to the capitalist state to intervene. But that state apparatus—government agencies, police, courts, FBI, CIA, etc.—is the principal force, in fact, of censorship and violence.

A fictional narrative runs through the film dramatizing the supposed impact of “social media addiction” on a mixed-race, suburban, middle-class family. Thirteen-year-old Isla (Sophia Hammons) has her confidence shattered through Instagram, and her older teenage brother Ben (Skyler Gisondo) becomes hooked on an unidentified, “extremist” ideology. Tellingly, he and sister Cassandra (Kara Hayward) both get arrested at a demonstration—horror of horrors! The filmmakers imply that dissent, regardless of the cause, is the dreaded by-product of social media brainwashing.

No technology introduced within class society is going to be immune from the contradictions of that society. The ruling elites, which own the means of

production, make use of the technologies, to the extent they can, for their own selfish, oppressive purposes. No one with a brain is blind to the harmful and even anti-social sides of digital technology and social media, including the rubbish put out by corporations and the media itself, the potential for ultra-right elements to organize and the enhanced ability of the authorities to spy on the population.

However, the capacity of billions of human beings to become connected in “real time” and respond to social and political developments, and ultimately intervene to transform society in a revolutionary fashion, that is, the inherently subversive character of these new media—it’s *this* that keeps the representatives of the establishment everywhere up at night.

In that sense, the stance of the filmmakers and their subjects in *The Social Dilemma* is part of that general hostile, anti-democratic attitude. These people see the real danger of their comfortable apple cart being overturned.

The film proceeds to treat social media entirely apart from any discussion of economic life and trends, including the important issue of who owns the giant tech companies and which class interests they pursue.

In the movie, the learned “experts” discuss issues such as mental health and threats to democracy *entirely apart* from the massive economic and social crisis and the moves toward authoritarianism by the ruling elite.

The movie’s website prominently claims that “64 percent of the people who joined extremist groups on Facebook did so because the algorithms steered them there.” What do they mean by “extremist”? Are they talking about left-wing movements or fascism? They are more than likely conveniently and self-servingly equating the two.

The website goes on: “Algorithms promote content that sparks outrage, hate, and amplifies biases within the data that we feed them.” No, malignant social inequality, poverty and injustice spark outrage and hate, causing millions of people to resist around the globe. Capitalism fears opposition, and apparently so do the makers of *The Social Dilemma*.

Orlowski and company promote the status quo. They are telling desperate, suffering people they should retain their faith in the existing institutions and media, when, in fact, masses of the populace are in the process of rejecting all that. The filmmakers and their brain

trust want people to remain under the control of “authoritative” sources, the officially sponsored “gatekeepers.”

It is deplorable that these individuals, many of whom are multi-millionaires, preach morality from on high to a hard-pressed and increasingly restless population.

The movie insists that people need to self-censor in regard to social media. If not, the state should step in, as its lead analyst Harris (himself a millionaire) advocated in the Senate hearing. The real target of mass censorship implemented by the technology giants, on behalf of the state, is left-wing political opposition, including workers’ use of social media to organize strikes and protests outside the existing unions. The WSWS has systematically been the target of such measures by Google, Facebook, Reddit and other outlets.

Having no social reforms to offer, the ruling elites see censorship and repression as the only means by which to prop up their rule. Consciously or not, the makers of *The Social Dilemma* offer their services in this endeavor.



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