

# The Disinformation Age

## and the Architecture of Attention

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*A publication-style reflection on *The Social Dilemma*, technology, wellness, and the quiet shaping of behavior.*

*The danger of social media is not simply that it wastes time. It is that it slowly alters what a person notices, values, desires, and eventually becomes.*

Originally written as a class discussion response. Reframed for publication with the original argument and voice preserved.

## **OPENING REFLECTION**

One of the most important aspects of *The Social Dilemma* is that the warning does not come from people outside the system. It comes from individuals who helped build the system: Tristan Harris, Tim Kendall, Jaron Lanier, and others who worked inside the social media and technology industries. Because of this, the documentary carries a different weight. These are not distant critics speculating about Google, YouTube, Instagram, or Facebook. They are people with direct knowledge of how these platforms operate, why they are designed the way they are, and what their consequences may be for the human mind.

Near the beginning of the documentary, a news reporter says that we have moved from the information age into the disinformation age. That line stayed with me because it captures one of the central problems of modern technology: the same tools that were supposed to connect people to knowledge can also distort the reality they believe they are seeing. Social media does not merely distribute information. It selects, amplifies, and personalizes information in ways that can quietly shape what a person thinks is true.

What I found most surprising was not that technology companies want attention. It was that their entire model depends on keeping people inside the app for as long as possible, because attention can be converted into advertisement revenue. From one perspective, this is an intelligent marketing strategy. From another perspective, it becomes ethically troubling when public health and human development are treated as secondary to engagement. If the system is designed to hold people's attention, then anxiety, comparison, lethargy, distraction, and dependency are not accidental side effects. They become predictable outcomes of the structure.

## **THE PRODUCT IS NOT THE APP**

Another quote that caught my attention was the idea that the product is the gradual, slight, imperceptible change in a person's behavior and perception. That sentence explains the problem more deeply than simply saying social media is addictive. The danger is not only that a person spends several hours scrolling. The deeper issue is that after enough time, the mind begins to view the world through the incentives of the platform. What receives attention begins to feel important. What receives approval begins to feel valuable. What is repeated begins to feel true.

This alteration of perception is unhealthy because it works slowly. A person may not notice the moment their attention span weakens, their self-image changes, or their sense of what matters becomes more dependent on what is shown to them. The change is gradual enough that it can feel natural. Yet over time, the individual's inner life can become less self-directed and more conditioned by the technology surrounding them.

This is especially concerning for younger generations. It is not healthy for a culture to be guided by systems that profit from manipulation, comparison, and emotional reaction. When communication is mainly surrounded by technology, people can begin to confuse connection with stimulation. A message, a notification, or a video can feel like contact, but it does not always replace the depth of real presence.

## **PERSONAL OBSERVATION**

I personally think social media is very addicting. There have been times when I did not have anything to do or anywhere to go, so I opened social media and was quickly pulled into several hours of TikTok or YouTube. This created a different dynamic from when I was younger and did not have social media. Without technology, I spent countless hours outside with friends. Now, after just a few hours outside, many people feel the need for a break and return to their phones.

This is not only a technological issue. It is a wellness issue. It changes how people rest, how they socialize, how they spend time, and how they understand themselves. The habit of checking social media can become so automatic that a person no longer chooses it consciously. The phone becomes the default place the mind goes when it is bored, uncertain, lonely, or uncomfortable.

In the past few months, I have found it rewarding to spend less time on technology. Even a small decrease in social media use can make the mind feel clearer. It creates more space to think, to be present, and to experience life without constantly filtering it through an algorithm. Ultimately, decreased time on social media has led to an improvement in my overall wellness.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Social Dilemma reveals that the central question is not whether social media is good or bad in a simple sense. The deeper question is whether people can remain sovereign over their own attention in a world designed to capture it. Technology can inform, connect, and inspire, but it can also distract, manipulate, and weaken the habits that make a person whole.

The responsibility, then, is not to reject technology entirely, but to use it with awareness. A person must learn to recognize when a tool has become a dependency, when connection has become comparison, and when information has become disinformation. In that recognition, there is still freedom: the freedom to step back, reclaim attention, and live with greater presence in the real world.

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## **ORIGINAL STUDY CONTEXT**

This piece began as a short discussion response for ESS 185. The original assignment examined The Social Dilemma through the lens of wellness, communication, attention, and the psychological effects of social media.

For publication, the piece has been reordered and lightly refined. The original central concerns remain: disinformation, the business model of attention, the slow alteration of behavior, the social consequences of digital dependence, and the personal value of reducing technology use.

## **REFERENCE**

The Social Dilemma. Directed by Jeff Orlowski, Exposure Labs, 2020.