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### **The Social Dilemma: A Public Discourse Analysis**

Jeff Orlowski's "The Social Dilemma" (2020) is a "documentary-drama hybrid" explaining the power of social media and how companies can profit from and exploit their users. It includes interviews with tech experts, former employees, and executives from companies such as Google, Facebook, Pinterest, and other major social media sites. The interviewees discuss their time and experiences at their respective companies and how said companies have caused negative political, social, and cultural spaces on the web, including the collecting and selling of personal data. They then divulge how social media has further polarized politics in the United States with the use of fake news and radically biased search engine results depending on location to further separate political parties and ideologies. The film also touches on teen use of social media and how gratification in the media has caused an upscale in teen suicides, among other issues. The film presents these interviews with corresponding dramatizations of a teenager's social media use and experiences.

The film begins discussing the underlying layers of why social media is so addictive and invites former Google design ethicist and co-founder of the Center for Humane Technology, Tristan Harris, to explain how tech companies have three main goals: engagement, advertisement, and growth. More legislation is needed regarding media use and how tech

companies can use or misuse the information they gain from their users. Because of this, “people's online activities are watched, tracked, and measured by these companies, who then use this data to build AI (artificial intelligence) models that predict the actions of their users” (Wikipedia, 2020). According to Harris, because of the intense amount of information that online tracking can retrieve, major tech and social media companies have become masters at keeping your attention on their respective platforms, hence the quote, “If something is free, you are not the consumer, but the product.” The film portrays this with a dramatization of how an AI might work. It is shown as the user, a teenage boy placed as a hologram in the center of some screens, and three actors portraying the AI itself. The actors calculatively choose what content to show the teenage boy to keep his attention and increase engagement. When the boy is not actively using the platform, the AI sends notifications to hook the boy back into the social platform and places ads through to further increase app activity, creating an addictive cycle of social media use. Although the dramatization might seem a bit unreal and exaggerated, the reality of the matter is, according to Harris, that this is exactly how giant social media companies make a profit.

The documentary itself primarily uses two mass communication theories to push its message: the framing theory and the uses and gratifications theory. Framing theory is presented as “how something is presented to the audience (called “the frame”) influences the choices people make about how to process that information” (Mass Communication Theory). The film uses dramatizations to present the issue (social media use) so its audience can visualize the importance of the message. From there, it urges the audience to better manage their media use and advises how to prevent abuse by the media. This is all in hopes that the audience will

connect with the dramatization and internalize it, and hopefully take the film's advice on how to prevent being used by the media the same way the teenage boy was. The irony, however, is that the film, a piece of media, influences the viewer to make decisions like an algorithm would.

Conversely, the uses and gratification theory states "media consumers are passive consumers of mass communications; rather, they play an active role in media consumption...it focuses on the needs, motives and gratifications of media users" (Gordon, 2022). According to communications theorist Harold Lasswell, audiences choose and use media for the following: diversion or entertainment, personal relationships, personal identity, and surveillance. The documentary produced by Exposure Labs, Argent Pictures, and The Space Program is exclusively distributed by Netflix, a mainstream entertainment streaming service. Netflix's purpose in the media is to entertain, so what better way to introduce a media documentary on an entertainment service? I watched the documentary when it was first released in 2020 because Netflix recommended it to me. I was looking for entertainment during my downtime and watched the film mainly for entertainment, but I found myself learning more about a topic I was already interested in. Ironically enough, Netflix's algorithm suggested I watch "The Social Dilemma," which is precisely what the documentary is about: being influenced by algorithms for the media's gain. The producers could have chosen to distribute the film on another streaming service, but they chose Netflix because they knew people using Netflix would click on their documentary primarily to be entertained and then use the documentary for surveillance purposes.

As a result of the documentary's release, Facebook released a statement saying, "[the film] gives a distorted view of how social media platforms work to create a convenient scapegoat for what are difficult and complex societal problems"(Facebook, 2020). CNBC has also reported

that users have started questioning whether they should continue using platforms like Instagram and Facebook after the documentary's release. However, Facebook has chosen not to speak or comment about the topic (Shead, 2020). Before watching the film, I knew about how media companies buy and sell your information and online activity, but I was not fully aware of the extent to which these companies went. My behavior towards using social media has mildly changed. For example, I try not to click on recommended videos or pages in Google that appear as ads, but I still use social media the exact amount I used to before. Some of my friends have decided to use social media cleanses to lower their screen time. However, I feel that the media generally has such a tight grip on society that even after the film's release, I don't think people's attitudes would change too much.

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