

Solving the Social Dilemma (Existential threats and how to deal with them)



Cassandra

Introduction

Cassandra was a priestess to Apollo and sister to Hector of Troy. Apollo took a shine to her and gave her the gift of prophecy. When he realised his affections were not reciprocated he became very angry. He was not able to take back a gift from the Gods so instead he cursed her to make prophecies that were true but would never be believed.

"The biggest mistake you can make is to be prematurely right" Peter Drucker

In September this year a Netflix documentary called 'The Social Dilemma' (TSD) was given its worldwide release. It contains disturbing warnings about the human and societal impact of AI driven social media.

Is the prophecy true or false? If true is it a tipping point or is it prematurely right? This article/paper is going to look at this in the context of two other 'existential threats', Climate Change and Pathogens. What are the patterns, how will the debate evolve, will it create change, what might the solutions be - what can we do about it?

Here's what I'm going to cover:-

- The meaning of 'Existential'
- The Big 3 Existential Threats and the division of opinion
- A dialectic process to reframe the debate
- Why AI driven social media might be the priority
- Some possible solutions

My own personal position is irrelevant. It matters not whether my views concur with those expressed in 'The Social Dilemma' any more than it matters what I think about Climate Change or Covid 19. As it happens my views on all 3 existential issues have evolved over time. Depending on the issue, I've moved from being disinterested to being highly concerned, but also from being highly concerned to more optimistic. What is perhaps relevant is that I feel more able to comment about AI driven Social Media

than Climate or Pathogens. And what really matters is what you think and what you do - this is just a contribution to the debate.

Existential

Certain words seem to pop up overnight and in no time at all they appear everywhere. Words like 'narrative', 'agency', 'curating' and 'existential'. They usurp the words we'd been perfectly happy with - story, power, managing or serious. This has always fascinated me and being a bit of word nerd I like to check them out and make sure I understand their true meaning - why the sudden attraction? In the case of 'existential' I vaguely understood what it meant - something that relates to existence. So in essence (a very important word, we'll come back to this shortly) an existential threat is one that risks our very existence and that is very concerning.

On the other hand I also vaguely remembered that existentialism was a branch of philosophy, Jean-Paul Sartre and all that stuff about angst rooted in the absurdity of life.

I decided to dig around and I was right. There are two meanings to existential. One meaning does indeed relate to existence. That is mostly how it is used today but with an added twist of 'clear and present danger'. An existential crisis is something really serious we have to deal with NOW or life as we know it will be over.

Listening to the narrative (aka stories in news and social media) we face a number of existential threats around racism, gender fluidity/equality, climate, water, population, the growing gap between haves and have-nots, Artificial Intelligence, China and Chinese hegemony (great word, look it up, it's all about domination and a power grab) to name just a few.

I'm not being flip when I say it's all very angst-inducing. All the more so as we are in the midst of an existential Covid-19 crisis soon to be an existential economic crisis and some unknown 'new normal' (there's another trendy phrase). And don't forget on top of all this there are the ever present existential challenges we all have as individuals - we have our own problems to deal with as regards our careers, health, family & friends.

I don't think I'm alone in my angst, I think this will resonate with a lot of people.

The enlightenment for me came from exploring the ideas behind existentialism. The nub of existentialism is that life is what we as individuals make it. Prior to the existentialists, philosophers like Aristotle or Aquinas believed that essence comes before existence, that there was a natural order of things, a meaning to life that determines our best actions and therefore the meaning of our existence. Existentialists believe the opposite. Existence precedes essence. The natural order is absurdity and only by the actions of individuals do we bring meaning and purpose. From good old Wiki, I share this:-

Sartre argued that a central proposition of existentialism is that existence precedes essence, which means that the most important consideration for individuals is that they are individuals—independently acting and responsible, conscious beings ("existence")—rather than what labels, roles, stereotypes, definitions, or other preconceived categories the individuals fit ("essence"). The actual life of the individuals is what constitutes what could be called their "true essence" instead of there being an arbitrarily attributed essence others use to define them.

Let's pause there and think about that. This might seem a bit heavy but actually it is very simple and very powerful. As Ghandi said, we can be the change we want to see. Each of us as individuals can bring meaning and purpose to life by our actions. There is no "Well, that's just the way it is" it can be what we choose to make it.

Unless, without us knowing, our individual thoughts and actions are being manipulated for an objective that does not have our best interests at heart. What if instead of being the change we want to see we become the change they want to see?

This is a bit of mental limbering up before the main event, considering the two sides of the 'existential' in existential threat. It is something so serious it threatens our very existence but it also recognises that nothing is 'meant to be' and we as individuals can make a difference before it's too late.....

The Big 3 Existential Threats

As noted above there are an alarming number of existential threats knocking around but I want to call out 3 of them. How much of a threat something poses is I suppose like beauty, it lies in the eye of the beholder. So let's just say this is my Big 3:-

- **Climate Change**
- **Zoonotic Pathogens**
- **AI generally and AI driven Social Media right now**

They are listed in no particular order, certainly not chronologically in terms of when they were first recognized. Alan Turing was warning about AI decades ago and the understanding of the dangers viruses pose to humanity goes back even further. But then again so do concerns about deterioration of the environment. They were warning about horseshit making London uninhabitable at the turn of the last century and the Great Smog of London was in 1952. Let's just say they've all been around for a while.

Nor are they in order of magnitude, they are all existential in the view of many people and there are no grades of extinction - extinct is extinct.

Can you rank them by the imminence of the threat. You could but as I will explain views change on this - right now Zoonotic Pathogens feels like a very clear and present danger. Will the virus get us before climatic disasters render the planet unfit for human habitation or will the machines take over before either? WTFK (figure it out)?

What I want to start by looking at is how they have reached, or are reaching, a tipping point where widespread awareness and concern provokes a meaningful response. I will just pick out a few milestones.

Climate Change

1988 - Intergovernmental Panel on Climate change set up following evidence provided to Congress by Professor James Hansen of Columbia University

2006 - "An Inconvenient Truth" is released, produced by Davis Guggenheim and fronted by Al Gore

2017 - Blue Planet II comes out, the follow up to the 2001 series. Around 2004- 2006 David Attenborough had become 'radicalized' about climate change and the second series contained stark warnings about climate and single use plastics.

2018 - Greta Thunberg launches 'School Strikes for Climate Change', Extinction Rebellion is born.

2015-2020 - there is a significant increase in extreme climate events (compared to the previous 5 years) ranging from extreme heat waves, arctic winters, floods, hurricanes, wild fires.

Zoonotic Pathogens

1980's - Aids emerges as an 'epidemic' 65 million infections, 25 million deaths worldwide. But not seen as a pandemic or Zoonotic (mutating pathogen passed from animal to human)

1990 journalist Robin Morantz Henig publishes a book titled "A Dancing Matrix" featuring warnings from virologist Stephen Morse about the dangers of emerging viruses that jump from animals to humans (zoonosis).

1999 - First studies published showing Aids a) to be zoonotic (passed from chimpanzees in the DRC) and b) to date back to 1920

2003 First outbreaks of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in Asia

2007 - 2 more books on the subject come out, "The Hot Zone" by Richard Preston and "The Coming Plague" by Laurie Garrett and both are best sellers.

2011 Steven Soderbergh's film "Contagion is released

2012 First of several MERS (Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome) outbreaks

2013 Major outbreak of Ebola in West Africa (Ebola had first been identified in 1976 in the DRC near the Ebola river)

2020 Coronavirus aka Covid 19

Let's pause there. These are just brief and highly selective/subjective chronologies but they are enough to see a pattern.

- Experts make discoveries and issue warnings
- This gets picked up in popular culture
- Concern becomes more widespread
- Events happen - dots are joined
- Issue rises on the political agenda
- Now you need to take sides - Politicians must act, Business must respond, etc

It's a bit messier than that but you get the picture. And there's a point to note - the picture. The role of the film or book or documentary or TV series can be pivotal.

So is 'The Social Dilemma' pivotal? Let's see....

The last point about taking sides is important. At a certain point people are forced into taking sides. But just as important is that a lot of people like me change sides in these debates about existential threats.

As the debate heats up and the issue approaches a tipping point I would argue there are 3 sides or groups you fall into (plus a 4th smaller group but we'll come on to that):-

1. Cassandras

"This is real, this could be really bad, something must be done - NOW!"

2. Doubting Thomas'

"This is hysterical 'woke' hype, calm down, you're over-reacting"

(Thomas was the disciple who refused to believe Jesus was dead until he could see it with his own eyes)

3. Ostriches

"I've got bigger things to worry about, it'll get sorted out, it always does"

If we look at these groups in the context of the Climate Change debate you can see Greta Thunberg, David Attenborough, Al Gore, Hollywood et al as the Cassandras. On the other side, the Doubting Thomas', you find the Oil industry, Donald Trump, the Right and Alt-Right.

The Ostriches, for the longest time, are most people, worried enough to recycle a bit and avoid plastic bags but mostly not wanting to think about it.

But when 'events' happen more of the Ostriches have to take sides, and if sufficient numbers join the Cassandras then the issue hits the top of the political and business agenda.

As for Zoonotic Pathogens, up until 2020, especially in the West where we'd been spared MERS and SARS or Ebola, the Cassandras were a small minority and the Ostriches/Ignorant/Blissfully Unaware were the vast majority. There were best-selling books but that does not mean many people read them. The film 'Contagion' did well at the box office initially but then faded away as movie goers rated it worse than the critics. The film was intended to be a wake-up call, we can see now it was very well researched and factually based with Covid (so far) following almost exactly the story line of the movie. But at the time it quickly joined the ranks of other dystopian movies (which is a big genre) and it did not have the catalytic effect that 'Inconvenient Truth' had for Climate Change. The containment of SARS, MERS and Ebola gave 'Doubting Thomas' and Ostriches all they needed to deny or ignore the threat. There was the previous pandemic Aids, but of course that did not affect everyone. Furthermore it was only years after the outbreak of Aids that there was any proof it was Zoonotic (a pathogen passed from animals to humans).

2020 has changed all that. It's too soon to predict the full impact but it has been a virtually simultaneous global event to which governments all over the world have reacted with measures that go far further in terms of economic impact than anything proposed by environmental zealots to deal with Climate Change. These measures, the restrictions on travel and economic activity may actually have bought us some extra time to deal with Climate Change. Some kind of silver lining.

Nonetheless, in the midst of the biggest existential event of our lifetime the 3 groups are very evident.

Cassandras

This has happened before and will continue to happen with increasing severity until it wipes us out unless we change how we live. Zoonotic Pathogens are now an existential threat because of population growth, climate change, urbanization and therefore the interaction between humans and animals.

Doubting Thomas'

Calm down, we can develop a vaccine and testing and herd immunity to fix this. Your cure is worse than the virus.

Ostriches

Just make it go away

[I'm going to dodge the issue of conspiracy theorists for now other than to say they exist for both sides of any debate.]

What will be fascinating to see is how the issue of Climate Change and Zoonotic Pathogens conflate. The extended lock-down gave people a major shock and a lot of time to think. There is a sense - which may or may not prevail as we slowly struggle back to 'normal' - that this is an opportunity to hit the re-set button and address the issues that will mitigate the existential threats of climate, viruses and others beside.

However, there is a risk that social media may make this impossible. I'm coming to that but before I do I want to talk about the 4th group.

Solutionists

This group sit between the other 3 groups. Their reaction is neither to deny or ignore or radicalize. Their reaction is to break the problem down and understand its component parts to find practical solutions. This is a trait found in business people generally and marketers in particular, at least if they're any good. (It's also found in the military). What is the mission, break it down, what are our strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities? Let's get all the various views on the table and work the problem. That kind of thinking. I'll illustrate this with Climate Change.

Problem as given

We are emitting an increasing amount of greenhouse gases creating climate change that will render parts of the planet uninhabitable and create extreme climate events with widespread loss of life.

Break the problem down

- How fast is this happening, what is the timeline?
- What are the factors involved, what is cause and effect?
- Which ones can we address? - prioritize the ones that have the biggest positive effect for the least social cost.
- What are the agents of change - who needs to do what?
- Get organized, make a plan, execute.
- Set an overall goal that can be measured, supported by short term interval - Key Performance Indicators

I'm not going to attempt to use this solutionist approach to solve climate change but I do believe it is more constructive and might produce better options we can test. But because of the way the Climate Change debate is

conducted - the way the Cassandras and the Thomas' and the Ostriches relate to each other - the solutionists get drowned out.

Just a couple of points to illustrate what I mean.

- Veganism (or at least flexitarianism) has the potential to make a bigger impact on greenhouse gases than more electric cars.
- What if we invested more money in CO2 harvesting?
- Whatever we do on alternative energy, plant based diet or CO2 capture the biggest threat is volcanoes - what could we do about that?

Sorry to mention that last point but unfortunately aside from the meteor that did for the dinosaurs, the biggest climate-related extinction events have been caused by volcanoes spewing out greenhouse gases. Perhaps there is nothing we can do to mitigate that risk but has anyone even thought about it?

There is a discussion to be had about any and every existential threat and for that discussion to lead to the best solutions it needs a framework that includes and respects different points of view. A way of arguing that looks for truth as the precursor for action.

It also needs a forum and a mandate so the lack of global leadership and the apparent impotency of the UN are very troubling. In times of crisis people need to come together and yet we seem to be descending into tribalism. What is causing that?

The Cassandras and the Thomas' don't just disagree they cancel each other. If you question Climate Change you are not just ignored on that issue, your views on anything are cancelled. At the very time we need more discussion, better and more open-minded debate we seem to have less than we ever did. Why is that?

The accusation has been made - in 'The Social Dilemma' - that the cause of this is Social Media. Not only is AI driven Social media a threat in and of itself, it is makes it less likely that we can debate and solve any other existential threat.

That is the other reason why I want to focus on this because if it is true then we need solutions for Social Media first.

Just before I try to unpack the Social Media issue and offer some solutions as a contribution to the debate let me offer a way of thinking about argument.

The Dialectic Method of Arguing

There are 3 ways to have a debate (or argument or discussion, same things) - but only one seeks to get to the truth.

Eristic

This is where you seek to dispute someone's point of view. You are not trying to find the truth, you are trying to prove you are right by proving the other side is wrong.

Didactic

This method of debate is intended to educate someone. You know the truth and you are just trying to get the other person to see the light.

Dialectic

This is a discourse between two or more people with different points of view who wish to arrive at the truth through reasoned argument. The ancient Greeks were keen on this, especially Plato who set up these kind of dialectic discussions between Socrates and his gang to kick ideas around until they arrived at the best new insights on the human condition.

Hegel thought this was a bit arbitrary and he developed the 3 stage dialectic method - thesis, antithesis, synthesis. Put another way, set out the problem, gather the reactions, get to a solution. Or to really spell it out in terms we can all understand:-

- 1. Here is what I think based on what I know***
- 2. What do you think about that based on what you know?***
- 3. Oh, that's interesting, so putting that together this seems to be the right thing to do***

Does that feel how the Climate Change debate has been conducted? Or does it match the other types of debating or arguing:-

I'm right, you're wrong and I'll prove it to you (eristic)

You don't know what you're talking about, let me explain it to you (didactic)

I apologise if this seems a bit academic or laboured but I think it's really important and I wanted to explain this before addressing the main point - how to react to 'The Social Dilemma'.

The dialectic approach is trying to get to the truth. Now I can think of a lot of arguments where I would not care much about that. Was Jonny Wilkinson a better fly half than Dan Carter? Is Porsche better than Ferrari. Is a skiing holiday better than a beach holiday? Was it my turn to empty the bins? For any of those I'd be perfectly happy, and indeed frequently use, either the eristic or didactic method of arguing.

But if we are debating what might be an existential threat to humanity I think I'd like us to get to the truth, or as close to the truth as humanly possible.

And as far as possible I'd like the dialectic discussion to be based on facts upon which we can all agree. I'm not happy with us having our own version of the facts.

According to 'The Social Dilemma' social media does not allow for dialectic discourse, it is not helping to find the truth and it allows (encourages) people to believe there are more than one version of facts. There can more than one point of view about what to conclude from the facts but there can only be one version of the facts.

If we can't get to a shared truth, one that only changes if new facts emerge, then we cannot solve problems, existential or otherwise.

So if TSD is right we need to address social media, now. If, on the other hand, it is not right or exaggerated then we should not allow our views on the ills of social media to be a distraction from more important debates.

So I'd encourage us all to take sides but argue this through dialectically.

The Experts in Dialectic Argument

I've flagged that business and the military both have a more solution oriented reflex based on breaking a problem down and applying a more dialectic form of argument that values shared truth.

There are 3 more expert areas that work on the basis of the dialectic process to establish truth as the source of decisions and actions.

The first is **science**. Good science follows a very clear process:-

- Null Hypothesis - the commonly accepted belief that two things are not related

- New Hypothesis - a new theory that they are - one that can be tested (if it can't be tested it's not a scientific hypothesis)
- Testing
- Alternative hypotheses
- More Testing
- Results
- Peer Group Review - very important. Good scientists want their peers to review and challenge their thinking, to make sure they have not missed anything, that the findings are robust and can be replicated.

The second is the **judiciary**.

Evidence is presented and interrogated by the people prosecuting an argument on the one hand and the people defending the prosecution on the other, presided over by an experienced but independent judge/panel of judges with or without a jury of citizens.

The third are government/international sponsored **Independent Commissions**

These are chaired by well-respected people with a clear mandate who have the opportunity to call on a wide range of experts and stakeholders to give evidence. They are free to consult with anyone they think can help. They consider all this evidence then produce a report and recommendations. In a way the best of science and the judiciary especially for taking on an issue rather than a specific case or hypothesis.

Obviously they are only as good as the mandate they are given, the breadth and depth of their enquiries and only as independent as the governments/international bodies that commission them allow them to be. Be that as it may....

When it's important, in business, the military, science, law, or issues of public concern we use a dialectic process best able to get to the truth.

We don't leave it to the Twittersphere to have a rational debate and come up with solutions based on lots of versions of the facts & truth.

That is the set-up - now let's focus on the social dilemma.

The Social Dilemma (TSD)

As with Climate Change and Zoonotic Pathogens I will start with a short and highly selective/subjective chronology to set the context.

2015 - a facebook app developer gets permission to use data from 87 million users and then, in breach of facebook's service agreement, gives this data to Cambridge Analytica

2016 - Trump won the presidency and the UK voted to leave the EU. Cambridge Analytica worked on both campaigns

2017 - accusations emerge that, using social media, there was foreign interference in both the US Presidential election and the UK Brexit referendum

2018 - Cambridge Analytica outed by UK's Channel 4 News and the company goes into liquidation.

Also in 2018 Mark Zuckerberg is called in front of a senate hearing

2019 - 'The Great Hack' is released by Netflix which explores " how Cambridge Analytica came to symbolise the dark side of social media in the wake of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, as uncovered by journalist Carole Cadwalladr."

2020 - 'The Social Dilemma' is released by Netflix. Where 'The Great Hack' made Cambridge Analytica the villain of the piece, TSD points the finger squarely at Big Tech Social Media.

One way to start the debate is to ask - is TSD a tipping point? Will it have the same catalytic effect in tackling the alleged evils of social media as 'Inconvenient Truth' had for tackling Climate Change?

That however is question for everyone - mine is just one point of view. So instead I want to use what I have set out so far:-

- Will this divide into Cassandras and Doubting Thomas' and Ostriches?
- What will their different points of view be?

- Can there be the basis of a sensible dialectic debate?
- What would be the solutionist approach?

To help with the first question I conducted a small survey among 50 or so people (the number is growing). I asked them 2 questions:-

1. Have you seen 'The Social Dilemma'?
2. What was your reaction?

The sample was made up of a range of people all of whom are, in some way or another, in a position to influence things. The list covers:-

- Senior Business Leaders
- Senior Business Academics
- Ad Agency Heads
- Consultants, advisors, social commentators
- Tech industry people (but not Social Media tech per se)
- Tech investors
- MBA students looking to work in disruptive Tech

(No journalists or politicians, nobody from Social Media, no scientists or teachers as such, or the church or the military and not much by way of 'the man or woman in the street' - so not a representative sample by any means).

So far the results confirm the groupings:-

Cassandras

This is a threat every bit as serious if not more serious than Climate Change. Something has to be done (more than one person confessed they have been working on a solution, an antidote, to social media for years).

Doubling Thomas'

Oh come on, media and data get's used to grab attention and persuade people to buy stuff, what else is new? Most people know how to use Social Media sensibly, it can be used for good or bad like any technology.

Ostriches

My favourite so far, from someone who really should know better "Sorry, can't help you. I don't use social media so not interested". I resisted the

temptation to point out that not eating bats or owning a car doesn't stop a lot of people caring about Pathogens or Climate Change.

So my first conclusion is that the same groupings as for Climate Change and Pathogens are evident in the debate around AI driven Social Networking platforms.

As regards how the battle lines will be drawn, I have used some of the insight from the responses above in describing the position of the various groups.

(Summary findings from the survey are given in the appendix)

To elaborate, the view of the Cassandras is captured in TSD and I think it would be helpful as succinctly as possible to lay out, from the film (it is part documentary part drama) the arguments against Social Media which resonated with the Cassandras.

The Case against Social Media & Networking Generally and Facebook Specifically

1. Their business model is based on advertising
2. This means they deliberately design their technology to maximise the amount of attention and use AI to manipulate their data to change what people think and do.
3. This results in detrimental effects on mental and physical health especially among the young.
4. It also provides a tool for malevolent players to subvert truth and drive agendas.
5. This is a threat to democracy and undermines our ability as a society to tackle important challenges - if everyone is entitled to their own facts there is no basis for constructive debate.
6. They will not change their business model unless forced to and their AI is out of control. In pursuing its profit goal it is evolving with no regard to the effect on humanity.
7. They are therefore the on-ramp for AI technology - the machines - to take over and either enslave humanity or wipe us out altogether.

Carefully picking a couple of quotes to support an argument is as potentially dangerous as fake news. However, this last argument that facebook is what will lead to humans being wiped out by machines is so outrageous I am going to do just that. Not in an effort to convince you but in an attempt to say this might not be as crazy as you think.

"It has become appallingly obvious that our technology has exceeded our humanity"

Albert Einstein

"AI doesn't have to be evil to destroy humanity - but if it has a goal and we get in its way....."

Elon Musk

Both Alan Turing and Stephan Hawkins predicted that machines will take over from humans.

Einstein, Musk, Turing, Hawkins might all be wrong of course. What is more likely is that there is the possibility that they're right unless we do something now. Which could mean starting by dealing with the use of AI in social media.

That sums up the case for the prosecution, the Cassandras.

What about the Doubting Thomas'?

In Defence of Social Media & Networking Generally and Facebook Specifically

1. The practice of offering content in return for attention and the opportunity to promote products has been with us for a long time as has the use of research and data to optimise that. People know the game and accept it.
2. There is a rising level of global angst, especially among young people, with consequent effects on mental and physical health - you can't pin all that on facebook.
3. There is always a problem if news channels are funded by advertising - your alternative is state owned news media or the BBC. People know to form their views based on a variety of sources (and we can educate the young to so).
4. Any technology has the potential for good or evil. Social Media has been more of a force for good.
5. Democracy means 'power to the people' and by providing a platform that allows people to express their views and mobilise movements they are as vital to democracy as was the printing press.
6. Humanity is a threat to itself (social media did not create Climate Change or Pathogens) - don't blame facebook.
7. If people want a paid-for social media platform free of advertising and with total data privacy then no-one is stopping anybody launching one. Zuckerberg said at the Senate Hearings he was open to the idea of offering an ad free paid-for alternative version of facebook.

8. Yes it shows the potential dangers of AI just like the potential dangers of genetic engineering - so regulate AI not just social media's use of AI. Address the issue not the symptom.

And by the way:-

Einstein was referring to the atom bomb

Elon Musk has a dislike of facebook and a long-running argument with Zuckerberg about the dangers of AI

Arguably Alan Turing wanted machines to take over - humanity had not been very kind to him.

Without technology we would have been deprived of some of Hawkins' best work. You could say he shows the potential of the symbiosis of humanity and technology.

And here's some old quotes (they are very easy to find thanks to Google's technology):-

"One machine can do the work of 50 ordinary people but no machine can do the work of one extraordinary person"
Elbert Hubbard (in 1910's)

"Technology made large populations possible: large populations now make technology indispensable"
Joseph Krutch (in 1960's)

"Computers are useless. They only give you answers"
Pablo Picasso

Population is the issue and if you don't want to tackle that then you better learn to love technology. It will only be as good as the questions we ask it and the goals we give it. Focus on that, not a bunch of big tech drop outs whining about teenagers spending too much time on their phones and worrying about what their friends think about them or what they can buy to improve their sense of self-worth. Blame the Kardashians for that

Solutionism

Reading this, do you conclude I am a Cassandra or a Doubting Thomas? I'm obviously not an Ostrich - I think this is an important issue, I think TSD is an important film (albeit with some flaws* as was true of

'Inconvenient Truth') and there is a debate to be had. But I am neither a Cassandra nor a Doubting Thomas - I am a solutionist who, as for any potentially existential threat, wants the right kind of debate, one that seeks to establish truth and facts through a dialectic process to provide practical effective answers.

As regards The Social Dilemma if you break the problem down I see 4 issues:-

- 1. The business model based on advertising and using advanced UI (user features e.g. the like button) and AI is having unintended and undesirable consequences.**
- 2. Too much of anything is a bad thing - exercise, food or screen time.**
- 3. People must have access, as their prime source of news, to information that is free of state or commercial interference.**
- 4. AI does pose very challenging questions, just like genetic engineering. It must be carefully regulated.**

*Sidebar

There are flaws in TSD:-

There is no case for the defence - there are references to the good social media can do but only in passing

It switches between interviews with concerned but one-sided experts and a dramatization of the relationship between AI driven social media depicted as little people in the phone manipulating a fictitious but supposedly typical American family. This does not really come off - it falls between two stools, neither a documentary or a drama.

It is very USA focused

The issue of venal social media and evil AI are conflated and the runaway between AI in social media to machines taking over is more asserted rather than explained.

It is very light on recommendations other than 'something needs to be done about this' probably regulation

(That said it is still trending strongly on Netflix at time of writing.)

Potential solutions to The Social Dilemma

This has been a long preamble but in my defence rushing straight to the conclusions would not really help progress an important debate. TSD does raise important concerns which if true make it hard to address this or any 'existential threat'. It helps to understand how we might best get to the truth and how best to set up the debate and get to possible solutions.

- We need to listen to all sides of the arguments.
- We need to establish a starting point.
- We want a thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis (and/or the Scientific, Independent Commission or Judicial equivalent).
- We want ideas, recommendations and solutions we can try out and test.

My personal motivation is that I have some ideas I have been working on for a while that I think might be part of the solution. I am going to conclude with those but I will now break cover and summarise how I see the debate around AI driven Social Media.

Social Media and AI are potentially fantastic for a civilised progressive society

There are two sides to this argument and we have to start by acknowledging the fantastic advances social media and AI are offering. Social media offers a new kind of democracy - power to the people - a weapon against tyranny and pernicious forces, a powerful tool to connect and collaborate and to level the playing field for the previously disadvantaged. AI offers the chance to solve intractable problems, free people from unfulfilling work and advance our society. They are not being pushed on us by evil people with sinister motives, they are the latest exciting stage in our development, the product of an innate curiosity and a need for technology that got us out of the caves and will perhaps get us all the way to the stars. To be human is to want always to look over the horizon, we can reset but we can't retreat. Yes, Social Media can be as positive for society as was the printing press; AI is just like the discovery of electricity, it can take us as far as we can imagine.

Like any technology Social Media and AI have unintended consequences, the potential to do as much harm as good. We've had the warning signs, this cannot be ignored.

The AI (and UI or 'User Interface') designed to maximise attention and ad revenue for social media have some nasty unintended consequences. In pursuit of its objective the technology has created addiction and mental health problems. It has selected and distributed content that polarises opinions and spreads bias. It has created a tool that can undermine our

most basic human right which is freedom of thought and is now a weapon that can and has been used to undermine democracy and influence elections. It never meant to, but it has. One of the most worrying accusations made in TSD is that the AI driving Social Media has outstripped the people running Social Media and their developers' ability to understand or control it.

That is how I see the thesis and anti-thesis, the merits of both sides of the arguments.

My synthesis is that we want to retain the benefits of Social Media but eliminate or at least control the unintended consequences. And we should also heed this warning and take this opportunity to create global controls for the development of AI in the future just as we have done for genetic engineering and embryo research and just as we are trying to do for Climate Change and, we all hope, Pathogens.

So I want to go back to the way I broke the problem down:-

- The business model based on advertising and using advanced UI (user features e.g. the like button) and AI is having unintended and undesirable consequences.
- Too much of anything is a bad thing - exercise, food or screen time.
- People must have access, as their prime source of news, to information that is free of state or commercial interference.
- AI does pose very challenging questions, just like genetic engineering. It must be carefully regulated.

Taking each in turn I offer these possible solutions:-

- 1. We have to break the Social Business model by taking away its ad revenue.**
- 2. We have to invest much more in tools and education to help people monitor and control their screen time**
- 3. We have to ensure that everyone has access to news and information that is free of political and commercial bias**
- 4. There must be an Independent & International Commission to establish guardrails and protocols for the future development and use of AI.**

My ideas address the first of these - breaking the ad based social media business model - and doing so without having to over-rely on government

regulation. I have more to say about that so will leave it to last and just quickly make a few points about the other three.

Tools and education to help people monitor and control screen time

The tools are already available but in my view the UI (user design features) are not so well developed. We need blatant, easy to use nudges for people to set limits and alerts. We need a concerted effort, starting at an early school age, to educate kids and equip them to manage their use of social media. Again this already happens in a lot of good schools, we just need more - and we need to remember that what gets measured, tested and rewarded gets done. As with tobacco or sugar we need to show the clear link between misuse and health issues and drive this home using a well-funded and well planned communications campaign . And we need to make it socially uncool - people want to drink but they don't want to be a sad drunk. People want to use social media but they don't want to be sad victims of Big Brother - TSD has hopefully helped with this (see Survey Results).

Universal access to news and information free of political and commercial bias.

How can this possibly be done? Well it already has to a certain extent. The BBC is not perfect and certainly has its critics in the UK. However, here are a few statistics that may surprise you:-

- BBC world reaches well over 300 million people worldwide and is on track to reach 500 million in a few years.
- 25% of its audience is aged between 15 and 24 years old
- BBC news reaches 300 million and is broadcast in 40 languages to 200 countries.

What percentage of influencers do we think that might be? I'm going to take a guess - out of 7 billion people probably only 25% could be considered to be influential. Somewhere between 1.5 and 2 billion people. BBC world and World News already reaches roughly 1 in 5 and is on track to reach 1 in 4 maybe even 1 in 3.

How about a UN funded GBC (Global Broadcasting Corporation) that reaches 100% of influencers with news that is free of political or commercial bias? If the BBC can achieve so much why should this be impossible?

Or come at it the other way - every nation agrees to have an independent news channel funded by the state and free of advertising. China would say that they have that, hmmm...

Independent Commission to establish guardrails and protocols for the development and application of AI

I would not rely on the UN for this. I think it would be more feasible to pick a few countries to collaborate and fund this:-

- **USA**
- **India**
- **EU & UK**

This is a big enough Geopolitical bloc and commercial market that anything they/we concluded and adopted would be trusted and followed by most other nations outside China and Russia - and it would paint the latter two into a corner. Ambitious but doable - it just needs one of them to take the initiative to set it up. Maybe just the EU & UK?

Breaking the Ad based Business Model

At the Senate Hearings in 2018, when pressed. Mark Zuckerberg did not rule out offering a subscription based, ad-free alternative version of Facebook. But not many us believe he would unless he was absolutely forced. One way to do this would be to regulate but is this likely? Who would regulate, how complex would the legislation need to be, how long would this take, how much money would those with a vested commercial interest throw at it to derail the regulation? Let's face it, the USA cannot successfully fight the NRA and 2nd Amendment gun lobby to even tighten gun control - all the while kids and minority groups are regularly gunned down.

And would it be fair to regulate? Several people commented in my survey that Social Media are not the only people harvesting attention and data, they just do it bigger and better. The boundaries of any such regulation would be blurry.

No, the most effective way to force Facebook et al to ditch their business model is to take away a huge part of their revenue by diverting it to a better alternative, better for other commercial players and better for us.

I made a promise to myself that this paper (rambling polemic?) would stop at 25 pages. So here is the cheat. I've written this up already so I'm going to give 3 links to where you can find my ideas if you're interested. The first two are blog posts on my web site and the 3rd is to my eBook, What's Wrong With Marketing (?). For the latter skip to pages 49&50.

<http://www.marksherrington.com/business-marketing/solving-the-facebook-problem/>

<http://www.marksherrington.com/business-marketing/solving-the-social-dilemma/>

<http://www.marksherrington.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/WHAT-IS-WRONG-WITH-MARKETING-Top-Article.pdf>

The summary of my first idea is that banks should evolve into an industry that not only guards, allows you to control and make returns on your money, but also your data. They have the fire power, they have the credibility (they already hold your most sensitive data) and they have a commercial interest.

There is another idea I've had for a platform that allows people to share and monetize their views and opinions. This would also put a big hole in social media revenue and is, I think, commercially very attractive. I'm happy to share - the other side of a signed NDA - with any interested party.

There are many other people I'm sure much smarter than me also working on this.....

.....Creating platforms that put people back in control of their own attention and their own data.

I truly believe this will somehow break through and provide a big part of the Solution to the Social Dilemma.

I thank you for your attention, please share your views and comments but keep your data to yourself!

Appendix: TSD Survey Results (to date)

50 people contacted by email in September 2020 and asked just 2 simple questions:-

1. Have you seen Netflix' "The Social Dilemma"?

2. What was your reaction?

Sample covered:-

- Senior Business Leaders
- Senior Business Academics
- Agency Heads
- Consultants, advisors, social commentators
- Tech industry people (but not Social Media per se)
- Tech investors
- MBA students

Selected as a group of potential influencers

Main Findings

1. Most had not seen the documentary but almost all had heard about it, intended to watch it and welcomed the prompt to do so. A topic of interest for most but not all.
2. Small minority had neither heard about or were interested to watch it. When told the subject matter they were indifferent - understood the issue but not that interested.
3. Reactions of those who did watch could be segmented into the 3 groups - actual verbatims below.
4. Of the larger group that were concerned, the more experienced people saw the need for regulation.
5. The younger group who universally understood the issue were also interested in 'self-help' tools - resigned to social media as part of life so wanting help to mitigate the downsides.
6. A very small minority were militant, well aware of the issue and actively working to address it or keen to do so.

Verbatims

Doubting Thomas'/Pragmatists

It was interesting but didn't feel like anything we don't already know and accept. My daughter and my mutual reaction more about slightly resisting the film's central premise about trying to shock the viewer into feeling terrified about the social media companies. It was really that premise that we both resisted, in the sense that we know the addictive and potentially corrosive nature of these social media platforms, but we choose to use them and accept it, anyway.

Agency Head

It's a significant problem. But it is probably less new than the presenters think. To some extent, the conventional news media have been doing the same thing for years.

CEO

Cassandras/Concerned

I've been worried about a lot of the same stuff for a long time, but this show highlights it well. I'd say it is largely true. I think we should put some serious restrictions on the biggest companies in this space for the good of humanity, and I am normally a "less government is better" kind of guy. I believe it is a crisis and an underlying issue for a lot of problems we are facing.

Tech Investor

I found it excellent and great to hear the insiders talking about the ramifications of what they have done. Regulation much needed and possibly even corporate break ups to reduce the overbearing influence of the big 5. Not enough in the documentary about how the actual business models work and that the whole ecosystem of digital advertising is as murky and immoral as the approach to content management. Need for further examination of surveillance capitalism at work.

CMO

I just assumed it was targeted ads - didn't know they aimed to get you hooked all day. Ahh that mind-shaping type of thing. I know I need to limit my time on this shit - and I've deleted instagram

MBA

Advertising based systems have core flaws that are probably net bad for individual users. We've built social media platforms in ways that are designed to be addictive for kids. That is ethically... questionable at best. Social platforms have distorted pretty much everyone's perception of reality and ability to get objective news (eh that's probably a melodramatic statement on my part, still)

MBA

Ostriches/Not interested

Have not seen it ... and don't use any social media myself.

Senior Consultant

No, not seen it - but my new book is out.

Social commentator and consultant

Militant

I reached my tipping point about this years ago and am actively working on a long term plan to do something thing about it.

Tech Entrepreneur

The mental health and global security of a generation is being systemically undermined by social media platforms. The most insane part is, they're selling our souls for an average annual revenue of less than \$10 /user. At the heart of this toxic, cancerous threat is advertising. Advertising is the most profitable way to monetise a social media platform. That is why these companies are incapable of stopping. That is their greatest weakness and it will be their undoing. The platform that will kill Facebook will be one that is prepared to make far, far less money than them and maximise the utility for users.

MBA

Please note:-

This is not a robust piece of research - at time of writing only 60% of the responses had come back. The sample is not representative of mainstream business or wider society. Its objective was more of a temperature check and as background for the main paper. The verbatims are genuine but obviously selected and categorised very subjectively.

