

THE DANGERS OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS TOLD BY *THE SOCIAL DILEMMA*: DIRECT MEDIA EFFECTS AND CINEMATIC VIDEOGAME AESTHETICS

LAURA ÁLVAREZ TRIGO
INSTITUTO FRANKLIN-UAH

The Social Dilemma is a Netflix docudrama directed by Jeff Orlowski and released in September 2020. The film aims to convey the dangers of careless use of technology, the tech industry's current issues with privacy regulations, and society's unhealthy dependency on social media platforms that, by enforcing addiction, prevent users from developing real interpersonal relationships. The film conveys these messages by employing two central narrative modes: firstly, interviews with experts within the technology industry, and second, a fictional narrative that exemplifies the dire consequences of our everyday mindless use of social media.

The docudrama as a genre is first and foremost a narrative of persuasion. Rather than representing reality its "basic purpose is to envelop us in the experience of its story. The overall thrust of docudrama is neither exposition nor logical argumentation, but persuasion" (Lipkin 2002, ix). The genre often entails persuasive discourse about moral implications and audiences tend to respond differently to a story than they would to argumentation—with the latter being characteristic of documentary style. Ultimately, docudrama is a strategy that, "at its most powerful, convinces us that it is properly both logical and emotional to associate cinematic proximity with moral truth" (Lipkin 2002, 31).

Keeping this in mind and focusing on the fictionalized sections in *The Social Dilemma*, this article shows how, in order to construct its persuasive message, this docudrama establishes a storyline that relies on a traditional understanding of direct media effects, as well as on a cinematic approach inspired by videogame narratives. Hence,

the main objective of this article is to analyze how the film, thanks to the aforementioned strategies, manages to build a horror story that serves to manipulate audiences in a way not dissimilar to the social media companies it condemns.

A WORD FROM THE EXPERTS

In order to provide some context, it is worth taking a closer look at the non-fictional sections of the film before delving into its fictional story. *The Social Dilemma* shows interviews with current and former Silicon Valley employees (from companies such as Google, Firefox, Instagram, and Facebook, among others). They express concern both about the lack of security, and about the economic interests that unethically drive the decisions of technological companies. All of these celebrated tech engineers insist throughout the film that, as they were working on developing algorithms for these companies, they were completely unable to foresee the appalling state of affairs that we are facing these days as regards the abusive and unethical behavior of big tech corporations. Many of the interviewees argue that these companies were doing good things around the world. However, being mere employees, they were, as former Facebook and Pinterest executive Tim Kendall puts it, “naïve about the flip side of the coin” (Orlowski 2020, 00:02:15-00:03:00). When directly asked what the problem is, the interviewees are shown averting their gazes and chuckling inconspicuously, unable to answer the question. For instance, Lynn Fox asserts that there is “no one bad guy” (00:03:00-00:03:20). The most important thing that the director and producers achieve by having these interviews structure and shape the narrative is to set “the boundaries of who gets to participate in these discussions” (Z.M.I. 2020). In this way, the film never opens up the conversation to the public and the users. Thus, it gets dangerously close to a persuasive and uncritical lecture from insiders who have coincidentally profited from the very practices they criticize (Z.M.I. 2020).

The central (non-fictional) character that the narrative follows is Tristan Harris. He is the former Google Design Ethicist, as well as the cofounder of the Center for Humane Technology, which was established as an independent nonprofit organization in 2018. The Center counts among its “founding allies, key advisors and community” cofounders and senior managers from companies such as Apple, Lyft, Pinterest, and Facebook. Apart from Harris and various other Silicon Valley current and former employees, there is another key member of this Center and interviewee in the docudrama: Shoshana Zuboff, author of *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019). Surveillance capitalism is, according to Zubbof, a new capitalist model shaped by the business practices of technological companies (Zubbof 2019). She is also a member of the Real Facebook Oversight Board, which was created to act independently from Facebook fearing that their inside board would not be sufficient to fight against current threats to the United States’ democracy (Solon 2020). Furthermore, the aforementioned Center for Humane

Technology presents its objectives regarding policy through the four areas of asymmetric power highlighted in Zuboff's latest book.

Evgeny Morozov, researcher on technology and politics, published a critique of Zuboff's book soon after it came out. He foregrounds how her work fails to discuss the implications, durability, and importance of surveillance capitalism as a model. Morozov offers a breakdown of Zuboff's basic premises carefully questioning each proposition. He argues that what Zuboff offers is ultimately an "impossible to falsify" tautology: "surveillance capitalists engage in surveillance capitalism because this is what the imperatives of surveillance capitalism demand" (Morozov 2019). However, he reasons, there is an easier explanation to the motivation behind data collection than the desire to control everybody's behavior through advertising. Namely, that "tech firms, like all firms, are driven by the need to assure long-term profitability" (Morozov 2019). The lack of critical discussion surrounding the implications of any capitalist model (not only surveillance capitalism) can be partially elucidated in *The Social Dilemma* as the docudrama works to showcase Zuboff's work. This is not to say that the practices of social media corporations are not nefarious. On the contrary, and as Morozov's previous criticism of the industry highlights, the issues that these insiders point out do not provide the public with the necessary critical and political tools to confront these companies' practices. As a sensationalist documentary, it does not concern itself with suggesting a productive way to engage with the numerous ethical problems that social media companies present. However, by virtue of its manipulative nature, audiences are often left with the feeling of having learnt all they should about the issue and that the only possible reaction is to fear these technologies.

DIRECT MEDIA EFFECTS

The fictional segments in the docudrama follow a short period in the lives of a middle-class average American family. These sections, reminiscent of a *Black Mirror* episode, are included primarily to portray the effects that social media addiction can potentially have on teens and pre-teens. The negative effects of social media on teenagers are evident in the two younger siblings. Isla, the youngest, is the first one to show signs of addiction as she is sitting on the couch, slowly scrolling through an Instagram-like feed while ignoring her mother, who has to repeatedly ask her to set the table. This occurs right after an intradiegetic news report on television warning about social media addiction. The dissenting voice is seen in the older daughter. She does not have a cellphone, criticizes the fact that her younger sister—who is only eleven years old—has one, and adamantly confronts her brother about how connecting through phones and social media is "not real connection" (Orlowski 2020, 00:4:45–00:05:06). Named Cassandra, she is the one that truly sees what is going on and foresees the dire future

that the interviewees in the film, working from the inside in powerful technological companies, were not able to predict.

The film focuses on how much social media can influence their decision-making, damage their capacity to create healthy interpersonal relationships, and negatively affect their image and self-worth. Notably, there is a fairly extended scene—which moves back and forth between the fictional narrative and the interviews—centered on how worried experts are about children (especially about young pre-teen girls) by showing the increase in self-harm, hospitalizations, and suicide rates in this segment of the population in the past twelve years. All these fears are embodied in the younger child, Isla, with images of statics cutting back to her crying in the mirror after getting a negative comment about her appearance online. Tim Harris argues that, in the past, “when children watched Saturday morning cartoons, we cared about protecting [them]” (Orlowski 2020, 38:00-45:00). His statement implies that this is not the case now and that, when it comes to social media and technology use, society does not care about their young anymore.

One of the key discussions among media scholars throughout the 20th century was the debate over how strong media effects could be. Experts are now opening up those conversations again looking at social media use. If we look at the portrayal of social media through the lenses of traditional media theory, we can find similar pessimistic reactions about the possible effects media consumption can have on children. Dreadful consequences were predicted with television (see Andison 1977, Eron 1982), and became particularly prominent with videogames (see Koop 1982, Anderson and Ford 1986). This return to old media theory perspectives, when coming from those within the tech industry, mirrors Henry Jenkins’ words in “The work of Theory in the Age of Digital Transformation”, where he argues that “the impact of digital communications [...] has created a new demand to answer questions which once would have seemed the arcane interest of media scholars” (1999). *The Social Dilemma* manifests this by having computer engineers instead of media researchers discussing social media platforms’ negative impact on its users and, most importantly, encouraging everyone to question their own use of social media and to realize how powerful media effects can be.

After establishing Isla’s addiction to her phone and social media, the film goes on to show news reports that uncritically mix stories of fake news, tech companies’ legal troubles during the past years, reports about the coronavirus, protests around the world, and news about terrorist organizations. This comes to a conclusion with a sentence uttered by one of the reporters in these clips: “our democracy is under assault” (Orlowski 2020, 00:05:32), which clearly sets the tone of the film. Soon after, Harris introduces the aim of his endeavor: “I wish more people could understand how this works because it shouldn’t be something that only the tech industry knows” (Orlowski 2020, 00:07:30–00:07:40). However, this is not really explained throughout the film. The

docudrama lists, explores, and fictionalizes the dangers of digital technology without providing the audience with the necessary tools to engage with the platforms that they use in a more critical way, which could grant them the ability to control how much it impacts them. A more critical approach could offer insight into direct forms of actions and protest that are not only in the hands of those still working and profiting in Silicon Valley. Moreover, a nuanced explanation of the present ethical problems could help people benefit from new technologies without having to completely shut them down or ban them for their teenage children.

The docudrama implies that a certain level of insecurity needs to be maintained for the audience to be engaged with the threat that it presents. In this sense, the horror genre is an appealing choice for this film's narrative. The construction of fear in horror is reliant on a lack of control and a lack of knowledge from the viewers, in a way not dissimilar from propaganda audiences. Propaganda is the main and most obvious example of direct and powerful media effects. It consists on media messages made by a specific group of people with specific political interests, and it is defined as "the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols" (Lasswell 1927, 627). Harold Lasswell wrote about propaganda techniques during the aftermath of the World War I. By establishing a strong association between media messages at the time and the terrors of the war, he showed how those narratives were often constructed based on fear. *The Social Dilemma* conveys how the attitude and interpersonal relationships of the protagonist's family are affected by the evil machinations of algorithms that we must fear.

The film directly addresses the necessity of the aforementioned lack of profound knowledge about the inner workings of what is feared. It does so via Arthur C. Clarke's third law, written against a black background, in white letters, and accompanied by ominous music: "Any sufficiently advance technology is indistinguishable from magic" (Orlowski 2020, 00:20:00). The documentary works to preserve this magic through various cinematic resources, including music, lighting, the use of sound, and the construction of the plot. Right after Clarke's quote appears on screen, Harris explains how magic tricks are effective precisely because there is something that audiences are unaware of. Lack of knowledge, just as in the case of persuasion—and, by extension, propaganda—, is what makes magic work. Ultimately, the assumption of powerful media effects helps define social media and digital platforms as a monster inhabiting everybody's screens. Contrary to Harris' declared intention, *The Social Dilemma* does not work to deconstruct the myth by giving audiences the tools to confront it. Instead, the docudrama perpetuates the aura of mysticism around the monster effectively increasing audiences' fear.

VIDEOGAME ELEMENTS AND AESTHETICS

There are specific details in the aesthetics of *The Social Dilemma* that are worth looking at because they influence the very narrative of the story. Some design and cinematographic decisions contribute to the Manichean framing that displaces the blame regarding what causes the damning effects that social media have. There are certain conventions in contemporary cinema on how videogames are to be represented on the big screen (see, for instance, *TRON: Legacy* (2010), and *Ready Player One* (2018)). This kind of filmic remediation of videogames can be found in various promotional images and thumbnails of the documentary. For instance, in one thumbnail (Fig. 1a.) we can see two men looking at their phones while they appear to confront each other in a position possibly inspired by fighting videogames. A second one (Fig. 1b.) displays an image of a heart with crosses for eyes and a sad face inside the outline of a person's head. Lines and squares that represent the digital realm surround this image. Besides being reminiscent of contemporary emojis, the crossed-out eyes are also a common symbol signifying death in traditional cartoons and videogames.



Figure 1a: Thumbnail.



Figure 1b: Thumbnail.

(*The Social Dilemma*, Netflix 2020).

One of the reasons to include designs so evocative of cinematic videogame aesthetics in the thumbnails is to conjure up the above-discussed assumption that videogames have negative effects on children and teenagers. While the first thumbnail (Figure 1a.) aims to represent people walking around so engrossed in their phones that they do not even look at each other, the image also primes us to associate the docudrama with a fighting narrative and (if only virtually) with brain/heart death (Figure 1b.).

In the docudrama, the psychological thriller and horror narrative come to the forefront as the mother locks everybody's phones away in a failed attempt to have a nice dinner together. Everybody in the family seems completely unable to have a conversation and Isla immediately turns to grab safety goggles and a hammer to recover her phone from the time lock box where her mother has put it. The scene ends with Cassandra challenging her brother Ben to stop using his phone for a week. Now that the conflict is presented, Harris appears to frame the problem as not only a direct confron-

tation but also a game. Speaking to the interviewers, he asserts that there are “thousands of engineers and supercomputers” behind our screens with different interests and goals than those of the consumers and audiences, and questions: “So who’s gonna win in that game?” (Orlowski 2020, 00:46:15–00:46:30).



Figure 2: Ben’s avatar. (*The Social Dilemma* 2020).

Harris describes how “on the other side of the screen it’s almost as if they had this avatar voodoo-doll-like model of us” (Orlowski 2020, 00:18:05–00:18:20). At this point, the film has already introduced us to this fictional (metaphorical) videogame’s interface, so the audience already knows what this “voodoo-doll” inside their screens is supposed to look like. The avatar is a three-dimensional human figure that represents our protagonist as the algorithms study his behavior. The figure is continuously shifting as it looks at various screens offering different content, with each of the screens representing different apps and social media platforms.



Figure 3: Anthropomorphized representation of algorithms, embodied in Engagement, Growth and Advertising. (*The Social Dilemma* 2020).

While Ben is on a break between classes at school, three men in this behind-the-screen reality stare at Ben's avatar in confusion, wondering and speculating about why he has not been on his phone for so long. These men represent the different algorithms that supposedly drive Ben's every decision regarding his social media use, and who work to maximize their specific objectives: Engagement, Growth, and Advertising. As this happens, Ben's avatar has already gained more detail because the algorithms keep on optimizing their understanding of his tastes and interests. Consequently, they are able to create a more accurate version of him.

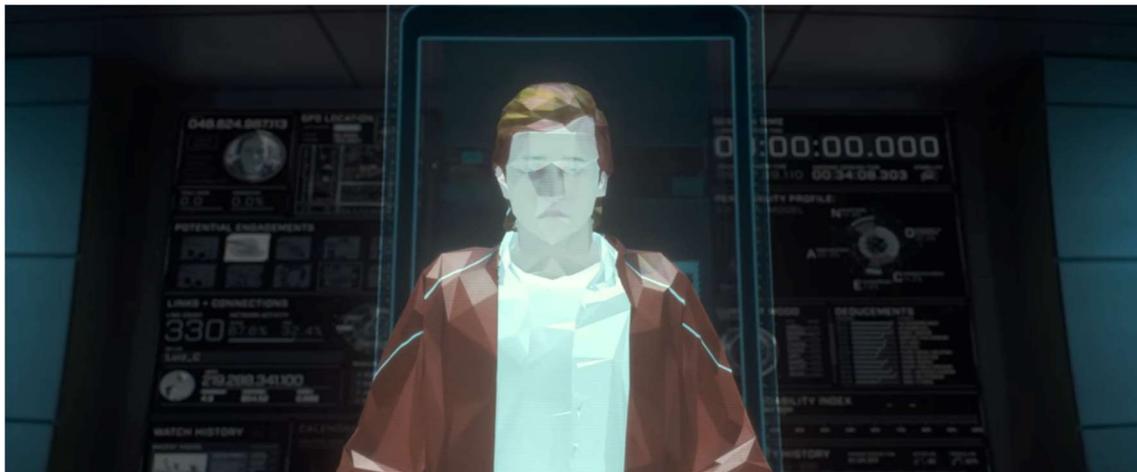


Figure 4: Ben's avatar as it gains more detail with his statistics behind him. (*The Social Dilemma* 2020).

These algorithms are framed as evil forces and sentient beings who are directly manipulating Ben's behavior in real time. It appears that, through some unknowable force, social networks and the use of technological devices have not only rewired his brain but have also taken full control over his self and decisions. There is no more Ben but an avatar—a displaced identity—that is controlled by an anthropomorphized set of entities that make decisions in his name. Later, when Ben stops using his phone for longer than two days, the algorithms start discussing among themselves what is it that they have done wrong for Ben to stop using his apps and social media altogether. When Bailey Richardson, from Instagram's early team, states that "the algorithm has a mind of its own" in the context of this accompanying fictional narrative, his words have a very literal connotation that goes beyond current machine learning potential. The embodiment of the monster in these three anthropomorphized algorithms who take over Ben's mind follows narratives of doom typical of sci-fi horror films in which automata rebel against their human oppressor and ultimately supplant them. By including these seemingly freethinking human-like algorithms, *The Social Dilemma* misconstrues the power and autonomy of technology in the sense that, in actuality, there is no evil mastermind algorithm controlling our every action but rather a powerful interconnected system of many companies', lobbyists' and governmental interests. In

this way, the docudrama helps dilute the responsibility of unethical business practices by redirecting our attention to the machine rather than the humans behind it.



Figure 5: Ben during a school fieldtrip, with a counter showing the time he has spent without his phone so far. (*The Social Dilemma* 2020).

Ben's despair while deprived of his phone is indicated via a stopwatch at the bottom of the screen. First, this is akin to countdowns provided in games for players to complete a specific task or stopwatches that players are encouraged to beat. Second, it also serves to communicate to the viewer that there is an impending catastrophe coming, as the image is also reminiscent of a bomb countdown. The one-to-one metaphor here is clear: social media users are transformed into playable characters for the algorithms to manipulate, gradually improving their performance. The film, however, leaves audiences with doubts regarding how the game is supposed to be played from the perspective of the user.

CASSANDRA WARNS US ABOUT THE FUTURE

After Ben opts to go back to his phone without completing the promised week away from it, he progressively becomes more and more interested in the fictional political movement EC (Extreme Center) thanks to the algorithms' chain of recommendations. This political group, in its extreme centrism, promotes the elimination of voting and acts as a stand-in for the unprecedented political radicalization that the narrative argues social media are fostering. In a dramatic turn of events, Cassandra and Ben end up being detained by police forces while Ben attempts to join a protest in support of the EC. These scenes, in a very misleading way, are uncritically mixed with images from different protests and police interventions—from anti-vaccination protests, a Pizzagate-related arrest, and COVID-19 deniers, to the Charlottesville car attack (Orlowski 2020, 01:12:40-01:14:15).

At the end of the docudrama, the three algorithms (Engagement, Growth, and Advertising) start glitching and merge into one single man. At the same time, following the trope of the doppelgänger, Ben's avatar becomes fully human (Orlowski 2020, 01:27:30-01:28:45). Essentially, Artificial Intelligence has outsmarted us and has managed to substitute the human without others (or himself) realizing it nor being able to prevent it.



Figure 6: Ben/Ben's avatar facing the combined embodiment of the algorithms (Engagement, Growth, and Advertising).
(*The Social Dilemma* 2020).

This docudrama is part of a contemporary mediascape characterized by cross-media interaction. Most importantly, it relies on techniques of framing and priming inspired by direct media effects theories and on the inclusion of videogame elements and narrative strategies. Harold Lasswell's understanding of propaganda as a way of managing collective attitudes fits perfectly with how *The Social Dilemma* itself relies on mass media—nowadays embodied in Netflix—to craft a message that induces anxiety on its audience ultimately influencing public opinion. When the film speaks of propaganda—on two separate occasions and always in the mouth of Cassandra as our seer (Orlowski 2020, 00:35:30; 00:59:30)—, it is concerning social media platforms. This is also expressed by Roger McNamee, Facebook early investor and venture capitalist, when he says that Facebook, “as a tool of persuasion, it may be the greatest thing ever created” (Orlowski 2020, 01:06:45-01:07:00). But, not by chance, his words are played to the sound of eerie ominous music and the film rapidly cuts to images of shocking news reports that involve protests and political results framed as some of the serious negative consequences of social media, effectively working to persuade the audience just as Facebook appears to be doing.

By trusting that a given media narrative has the potential to have direct effects on audiences, aided by the appeal and audiences' familiarity with videogame interfaces, *The Social Dilemma* manages to construct a Manichean narrative with a very elusive

and misconstrued evil side. It purposefully develops a horror narrative inspired by the practices we are meant to fear. By the end of the narrative, if “you feel concerned about what ‘surveillance capitalism’ has done [...] but ultimately trust that Silicon Valley insiders are on the case—then the film has succeeded in its mission” (Z.M.L. 2020). Perpetuating the blind spots Morozov found in Zuboff’s work and relying on the cinematic tradition of the horror genre, *The Social Dilemma* manages to get its message across.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

- Anderson, Craig A., and Catherine M. Ford. 1986. “Affect of the Game Player: Short-term Effects of Highly and Mildly Aggressive Video Games.” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 12(4): 390-402.
- Andison, F. Scott. 1977. “TV Violence and Viewer Aggression: A Cumulation of Study results 1956–1976.” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 41(3): 314-331.
- Center for Humane Technology. 2021. Accessed March 15, 2021. <https://www.humanetech.com/>
- Eron, Leonard D. 1982. “Parent–child Interaction, Television Violence, and Aggression of Children.” *American Psychologist*, 37(2): 197.
- Jenkins, Henry. 1999. “The Work of Theory in the Age of Digital Transformation.” *A Companion to Film Theory*, edited by Toby Miller and Robert Stam. London: Blackwell.
- Koop, C. Everett. 1982. “Surgeon general sees danger in video games.” *New York Times*. Published November 10, 1982. Accessed March 16, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/11/10/us/around-the-nation-surgeon-general-sees-danger-in-video-games.html>
- Lasswell, Harold D. 1927. “The Theory of Political Propaganda.” *The American Political Science Review*, 21(3): 627-31. JSTOR. www.jstor.org/stable/1945515.
- Lipkin, Steven N. 2002. *Real emotional logic: Film and television docudrama as persuasive practice*. Carbondale, Edwardsville: SIU Press.
- Morozov, Evgeny. 2019. “Capitalism’s New Clothes.” *The Baffler*. Published February 4, 2019. Accessed March 16, 2021. <https://thebaffler.com/latest/capitalisms-new-clothes-morozov>
- Orlowski, Jeff. 2020. *The Social Dilemma*. Netflix.
- Real Facebook Oversight Board. 2021. Accessed March 16, 2021. <https://the-citizens.com/real-facebook-oversight/about-us/>



- Solon, Olivia. 2020. "While Facebook Works to Create an Oversight Board, Industry Experts Formed Their Own." *NBC News*. Published September 25, 2020. Accessed March 15, 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/facebook-real-oversight-board-n1240958>
- Z.M.I. 2020. "Flamethrowers and Fire Extinguishers – a review of *The Social Dilemma*." *Librarian-Shipwreck*. Published September 17, 2020. Accessed March 14, 2021. <https://wp.me/p38S12-Vj>
- . 2020. "Be Wary of Silicon Valley's Guilty Conscience: on The Center for Humane Technology." *LibrarianShipwreck*. Published February 13, 2018. Accessed March 15, 2021. <https://wp.me/p38S12-FS>
- Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. New York: Profile books.

SUGGESTED CITATION: Álvarez Trigo, Laura. 2021. "The Dangers of Social Media as Told by *The Social Dilemma*: Direct Media Effects and Cinematic Videogame Aesthetics." *PopMeC Research Blog*. Published June 8.