



AxisofEasy Salon #15: Toxic Tech Platforms and Disposable Social Media Stars

Mark Jeftovic, Jesse Hirsh, and Charles Hugh Smith

Charles Hugh Smith:

Where the hell, there's no middle ground. It's bizarre. Even within PhDs and people who claim to be scientists, it's like; I've never seen anything like it.

The Vietnam War – you know, divide on steroids.

Jesse Hirsh:

I mean, I think what is common around the world is the no middle ground, right? And it doesn't matter what the issue is. There is no room – there's no space for the middle. There's no prize for the middle. There's no incentive to be in the middle, because one side is going to attack you anyway. So either you pick a side, so at least there's safety in numbers; or you're motivated to attack the other side because they're fucked up – because that's what you think the other side is.

Mark Jeftovic:

We talked about that briefly – I believe two episodes ago – and I think I even put the Pew research graph into the show that showed that you can't win an election in the middle anymore because there isn't enough volume there to gain a majority. So it's only going to be on either edge, and it will pendulumatically go back and forth to more extremes on either side. I think until the whole thing just spins off the top.

[opening credits]

Jesse Hirsh:

But to bring it back to their subject for today, you can't run a social media company from the middle. You got to do it at the extremes. You got to do it where people are passionate and pissed off and ready to post and ready to go nuts. And I think that is why that there is no middle.

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It is the social media fact that in an attention economy, you're not going to get much attention by being reasonable and mediocre.

Mark Jeftovic:

Before we get too much farther, welcome to the AxisofEasy #15 with Charles Hugh Smith from the Big Island in Hawai'i, Jesse Hirsch from the Ottawa Valley, Mark Jeftovic from East – uh – WEST end of Toronto – forgot where I lived.

Jesse Hirsh:

East end of Etobicoke.

Mark Jeftovic:

East end of Etobicoke, West End of Toronto. Now you got my number.

Okay. What I was going to say about – you can't run a social media network from the middle. When I was writing my book, I don't mean this to be a plug for my book, but I did come across that study that showed that the most viral emotion is anger. Like if you want to get a story to spread the most, you have to make people angry. And actually counter-intuitively, fear was one of the worst performing emotions to share something.

But anger was very good. And I think a lot of people kind of don't understand that distinction. So there's a lot of fear porn. There's a lot of like fear-mongering, but it only works when it makes you angry. And you know, Jesse, I think we were talking about this on our phone calls over the last week. And this morning, I was looking at Twitter and I'm like, every single tweet in my feed is outrage. Outrage, all of it. And I'm like, I just – I can't do this anymore. And we've both talked about, should we cancel? I would like to be able to cancel my social media accounts, but one of the reasons I feel like I can't cancel my Twitter account is because I get a lot of the AxisofEasy news items like tech news and privacy news come off of Twitter. Facebook, I use it to share all that stuff, but then I feel like if I cancel my social media accounts, isn't that just burying my head in the sand and

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pretending that the world isn't burning around me? I don't know. And then I'll just quickly mention that i know you're not as you...you're not as.... Jesus.

The Jaron Lanier book – 10 Reasons to Cancel your Social Media Accounts Right Now. I know you're not as much of an aficionado as I am of his books, but he really did, I think, nail that book. He wrote it intentionally in the style of for arguments, for the elimination of television, that classic gerrymander book or whatever, the mander book from the eighties, I think it was. And one of the things he said is social media turns us into assholes. And it really does.

Jesse Hirsh:

I think we brought up that gerrymander book a couple of episodes ago.

Mark Jeftovic:

The Four Arguments book?

Jesse Hirsh:

Yeah. Because I have a copy and I remembered going and revisiting it; and it's good. It's a little like Neil Postman, and that it's romanticizing some glorious past that didn't exist, but I think you're right. And drawing the connection between that and Lanier's work. I mean –

Mark Jeftovic:

Well it's not me. Lanier deliberately wrote his book as an ode to it, but yeah.

Jesse Hirsh:

Yeah. Fair enough. But nonetheless, you shared him sharing that, so I'm crediting you.

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Mark Jeftovic:

Right.

Jesse Hirsh:

But I'm not sure your analogy of putting your head in the sand is fair. I think taking shelter from the storm is a more fitting analogy, because on the one hand it absolutely makes sense to take shelter from the storm. What kind of idiot would you be to go stand up there in the middle of the rain and wind; and yet, that's what people do. That's what social media is. And there is a certain professional compulsion to be a storm chaser. To be out there in the wind. To be out there in the rain. To be out there going: Oh my God, look at this. It's so crazy, I'm being blown away here.

The other analogy I think of is junk food. That social media is junk food – it tastes great. It sort of immediately gives you a bit of a rush, but fundamentally, that sense of satisfaction is fleeting, and it will kill you. It will make you sick. It is not a basis of nutrition. It is not the basis of a good diet. It is kind of the difference between looking on social media and reading a book, is the difference between eating junk food and making your own meal, or eating a healthy meal. But all of these things are very addictive, right?

The other analogy, especially in the context of the antitrust hearings that happened this week, is Big Tobacco and treating social media as an addictive narcotic. And that it's tough to blame the users of that narcotic, especially when they're addicted, but it's more how do we help them? How do we deal with addiction? How do we look at harm reduction strategies?

I think all of those metaphors fit for social media. And I think that we should be celebrating the Laniers, the people who told us to quit, the people who have quit. Because I can't quit. I live in a rural community where to give up Facebook means giving up my connection to the rural community. I'm conflicted with the other platforms, but part of what we're going to talk about today is Tiktok and Oh God, am I addicted to Tiktok. Man, I can't turn that stuff off. It's like crack.

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So I think this is all relevant discussion. And I think situated within the power dynamics we talk about every week, both the financialization of our economy – because I think that was part of the antitrust hearings yesterday in terms of the anti-competitive and monopolistic practices that these companies engage in, but also the cultural impacts. Because the Republicans – and I'm not faulting them for this, it was a political calculation on their part, but the Republicans chose to use the antitrust hearings yesterday to accuse the digital companies of bias. To accuse them of being anti-conservative.

And again, I don't fault them for doing that because I think they're partly right, but it speaks to a political calculation on their part in terms of anticipating the election and anticipating how that plays out. So in summary, it's all complicated. And I think there's multiple ways in which we try to imagine the effects of this. Each of which only gives us a glimpse as to what's actually going on.

Charles Hugh Smith:

I'm going to bust in here with an anecdote. A Monty Python anecdote which I think is something that I kind of always refer back to. I forget which of the Monty Python guys said this, but his standard introduction to any topic was: This really pisses me off. So like, according to the other Monty Python guy, said: you know what really pisses me off? The inquisition. And so I think we should just do that ourselves. You know what really pisses me off so we can just kind of introduce a subtext of anger throughout everything we say just to boost our nonexistent revenues if the inquisition really pisses me off.

I just want to introduce the word that I'm going to refer to after I hear what you guys have to say about Tiktok, which is one of my favorite words, which I get passionate about and then I drop out, I don't use it anymore. And then I start using it again and then readers tell me: would you shut up using the word? So that word is derealization, which is a psychiatric term where you feel like you're living in a movie or you feel like you're watching yourself through a screen or something. I use it as more of a social, cultural economic term, that our lived reality gets derealized. And that's, I think, part of what's happening in the whole social media thing which is poorly understood.

And my other favorite word that readers tell me to stop using is simulacrum, right? Because it's like a simulation of reality, and then it confuses us. And then it sets up what

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I wrote about this week, which is a sort of psychotic state where you can't make sense of not just cognitive dissonance, but they are directly opposed to each other – they're contradictory. And so the human mind is incapable of balancing these things, and so then it's sort of like the lab reps that are when they're all pushed together into a mass and then randomly shocked, right? There are two responses. Either go catatonic, or they become wildly aggressive. And I think you can kind of see that playing out and hey, we're like what? 95% rat DNA and 97% Chimp DNA. So all of us mammals tend to respond in the same way limbically.

So anyways, onward.

Mark Jeftovic:

I know we're going to get to Tiktok soon, but I want to talk about –

Jesse Hirsh:

We hope. We hope.

Mark Jeftovic:

Yeah. The credits will roll, it'll be like, guess what we didn't talk about on the Tiktok episode. But this whole psychological –

Jesse Hirsh:

No, we'll just end it with follow us on Tiktok.

Mark Jeftovic:

Yeah. And Jesse is the only guy with an account. And cut this whole thing up into 15 second things. That'll be terrific. But the thing is, we all have to be doing Tiktok dances though, as we do our things.

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Jesse Hirsh:

I'll address that. Please, continue.

Mark Jeftovic:

So the psychological aspect of all of this, especially the social media, I mean – Jesse, you made the comparison to a narcotic, and we do know that Facebook was optimizing for dopamine hits in the beginning, and probably still are, and everyone probably does it now. And so in that sense, it literally is a narcotic, because the reason you take narcotics is to convince your brain. Is to release dopamine through whether you're snorting some crystal up your nose, or smoking some leaf, or you're on Facebook clicking on like buttons. It's all doing the same thing at the end of the day. Like the way a nuclear power – all it really does to generate electricity is create steam to turn a turbine, right? So at the end of the day, these are all just mechanisms to get the dopamine hits coming in. So social media is literally a narcotic, but Charles, your idea about derealization made me think of a concept that I knew years ago, and then just got reacquainted with it yesterday in fact; and that's the idea of – it's an indigenous word Wetiko, or I don't know if I'm pronouncing it properly – but it's kind of like a shadow spirit within all people that is contagious. Like a mind virus.

And there was an author Paul Levy or Levy, I don't know how you pronounce his name even though I just heard it yesterday, who wrote a book called Dispelling Wetiko years ago, which I read. And then I picked up another book of his recently - Quantum Revelation I think it's called, but I didn't even realize it was the same author. And then I was on Doug McKenty's The Shift show a few weeks ago, and I started following that show. And so Paul Levy was on yesterday and I suddenly put it all together and realized this is the same guy. And his whole thing is that – it's before yesterday I was walking around for about a week, and I was at times in quite a state. I mean, Jesse and I were on signal and I was pretty agitated about a couple of things.

And it kept coming back to this. My day's going fine until I start tuning into social media and then everything kind of goes off the rail for me. And I would experience these bouts of real physical depression. I still do. Just angst, hopelessness, and it's like, everybody is going through this.

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And a lot of people are describing it to pandemic stress and lockdown stress, and it is all that. And it's all being aggravated by this social media. But before yesterday, I was trying to articulate a thought in my mind that I was saying, this is all some kind of collective psychosis. It's a collective contagion. A contagion of hysteria doesn't capture it. Paranoia doesn't capture it. Hostility, angst doesn't quite capture it. But then, when I reconnected with Levy's conception of wetiko, where you perpetuate the contagion just by thinking that you're thinking that others are exhibiting it. But really, so if you're reacting to somebody else's anger or rage, and you think that that person is way out of line or way off site on some point, you're actually infecting yourself reacting to your own shadow. And I don't think that I'm articulating it properly, but it was really kind of a perverse dynamic that once you fully understood it, number one, it explained exactly the kind of manifestations or outcomes that we see in the world today, especially this absolute unbridgeable polarity; and two, the speed with which it's just rippled through all of society and impacts everybody.

And so, when you sort of look at it and say: every time I'm reacting to somebody else saying they're way over on the other side of the spectrum, and this person is irredeemably wrong, you're actually infecting your own mind with your own reflection of your own shadow, and you're perpetuating it onto the next note. It's like a cascading psychosis throughout all of society. Again, I don't really think I explained it properly, but –

Jesse Hirsh:

I think he did. I think he did a valiant effort to yeah. I think you're describing something that is particularly complex and abstract, and that's what makes it difficult to describe. But at the same time, I think it's possible to describe it in even easier terms. And I'll start by pushing back and saying, I don't think the current polarization is unbridgeable. I think part of the mental trap that you just described is what makes it feel unbridgeable. But that what I find reassuring of the mental trap that you described is that even though it sounds complicated, it's not. And we sort of alluded to it that one easy antidote is the turn social media off, right? Is that to prevent, you know, if you cut off where the virus is coming from, it's pretty easy for your mind and body to heal and for you to start feeling better.

Again, that's my own experience, because I too am experiencing the same distress, the same illness. And I find that the times I don't go on to social media are the times that I don't suffer from it. And then I feel better. And that when I do find myself going there, I realize: Oh, I looked at Twitter again and I close it and I go elsewhere.

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And to your point, Twitter is a good source of news and intelligence for me, but that's where my metaviews Twitter account is fantastic, because unlike my Jessie Hirsh account, which I've grown over the years, and it reflects my personal interest and connections; my metaviews account, I'm ruthless. If I'm following someone on that account and I don't like them, I unfollow them without thinking much about it because it's normal. So my metaviews account, I've much more carefully curated the signal that comes in. And so it's less likely to upset me, but it still might. But I digress.

I want to come back to your point about the unbridgeable polarization because I don't think it's unbridgeable. And I think part of the frame is shaped by Twitter and Facebook, AKA Instagram and YouTube, because they have a very specific algorithmic configuration that I think makes social media so problematic. And that's why Tiktok is interesting. Because Tiktok is the first successful – and I mean like mass society successful social media that has a completely different algorithmic configuration. On the surface, Tiktok is identical to all these platforms. And that's where I'll playfully push back and say even though Tiktok is heavily associated with dancing and lip syncing, that's not what Tiktok is about. Tiktok is about the same thing as all the others, which is automated media production. That these are platforms that use artificial intelligence to make the production and distribution of media as accessible as possible so that anyone can create content.

The fact that a lot of young girls are using this to dance, or to do lip-syncing, that is culturally significant. but to bring it back to my point – and I'll elaborate more on tech talk in a bit – but I want to go back to your point about the unbridgeable polarization. I find that Tiktok exposes me to people that I would disagree with, or that would be the opposite of me in a way that makes me not hostile towards them. In a way that makes me more open to their perspective, more empathetic to their perspective. And if done with the right open mind, I actually feel it starts to reverse a little bit of the polarization – for me, maybe, not for other people, in a way that reinforces my belief that Facebook is the problem; and that Twitter is the problem. But it's not social media. That it's these companies. and that Mastodon or Duckduckgo, or any of these alternatives, could actually be done differently. And that it's the companies and executives in charge of this that are the real issue.

Mark Jeftovic:

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Can you give us a – because you're the only Tiktok user here and you're talking about how it's sort of a fundamental difference in approach. Can you just give us a reader's digest explanation of that? You touched on it a bit, but I just thought maybe just flush it out, just to touch more –

Jesse Hirsh:

And for the audiences' benefit, at the end of last episode, we kind of got into this when the cameras stopped.

Mark Jefotovic:

I know. Yeah.

Jesse Hirsh:

So that's part of why we're focusing on it this Salon, because we all got a sense of you know –

We really got to talk about it.

Mark Jeftovic:

Well there is another aspect that I wanted to talk about, but go ahead. We'll get to that soon, but go ahead.

Jesse Hirsh:

Well, I was going to say my main point then was it really comes down to fame and the desire to be famous, and our relationship with fame. And Tiktok takes a radically different approach to the idea of fame than the other platforms. Because if you think about Twitter, it's about followers. And if you think about Facebook, it's about friends. And if you think about YouTube, it's about subscribers. And in all three cases, these are things that you

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have to earn. So it almost turns them into a currency, right? It's like followers as a currency, or subscribers or friends as a currency.

Tiktok does away with that because with Tiktok, those things don't matter. Yes, people get followers and yes, those followers count; but Tiktok's feed, which they call the For You page, which is the default interface, it doesn't matter who you follow, it just shows you content. And this content has a few different vectors to determine whether you see it or not. The most important factor is location. So it's going to show you content that's nearby or that's in your region, but – and here's where the AI comes in – Important – Tiktok is able to use object recognition and audio recognition and pattern recognition to understand what you're looking at, so that you don't need to hit the like button. You don't need to post a comment. You don't need to do anything at all. If you watch the video, it knows. And it starts serving up other videos that resemble the videos that it knows you watch. So in my case, I see lots of horse videos partly because I live in an area that's rural, but also partly because I'm interested in horses because all of a sudden I got two of them.

So I don't "like" these videos. I don't follow anyone who likes horses, but Tiktok just figures out what I'm interested in, in a precision and an effectiveness that puts the other guys to shame. So that's one way it's different. And that it automatically curates content to you based on how you interact with it – not who you interact with. So it all makes priority as a biased relevance, as anyone has the opportunity to get their content seen, and anyone does. So that means that the economy of fame is all of a sudden more accessible. More random. That anyone can become famous. Anyone can have their video go viral, and that's interesting. Now I'm not suggesting that it's meritocratic, but it is more meritocratic than all the others. And everybody gets that right away. Everyone quickly realizes that on YouTube, on Twitter, on Facebook, the scales are skewed to incumbents and celebrities and companies with big budgets, but on Tiktok, there really is a belief – not entirely true, but more true than the others – that anyone can be famous.

And as a result, there's more hustle. There's more effort. There are more people doing every type of content you can imagine. Literally. Every kind of content. The only restriction is maximum 60 seconds – that the most a post can be is a minute. But sometimes it's audio only, sometimes it's video, sometimes it's photos, sometimes it's animated. Like the sky's the limit – the kind of creativity that's being used and Tiktok as a company invest heavily in their technology. So for example, one of the features that they embraced before anyone else is deepfakes, right? Deepfake technology is this kind of AI that uses facial recognition to transpose someone's face onto video so that you could make fake Barack Obama or fake –

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So that's a feature in Tiktok, right? That type of technology of like the facial recognition, the deepfakes – all of that – though that's the type of thing that they bake into their features and their filters, and it got hundreds of them. So Tiktok is at a whole other level and we haven't got into the geopolitics, or the China connection, or the surveillance.

Mark Jeftovic:

Well that's the whole – yeah.

Jesse Hirsh:

Yes. But just on a user level, the reason then that the app is growing like gangbusters is it gives people a legitimate opportunity to become famous. It makes it real easy for them to make crazy content. And it actually has a configuration in which it's not who you follow, but what you're interested in. And Tiktok figures it out quicker than any other platform, and serves it to you in a kind of accuracy that you know. And then finally, Tiktok has a more – what's the word I'm looking for? – permissive approach to content, in that there's a whole lot more nipples, there's a whole lot more blood, there's a whole lot more rednecks running ATVs off huge jumps that you would never see in another platform. And that's also true about political content. That political content that wouldn't apply in other platforms has more of a shelf life on Tiktok. I think all of that creates a bit of a taboo factor that also fuels itself.

Mark Jeftovic:

I just have to very quickly jump in and point of information – I just realized this now – I looked it up while you were talking to confirm that Tiktok is what Musically was.

Jesse Hirsh:

Yes.

Mark Jeftovic:

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My daughter used to be into this thing called musically, and when I was researching Musically, I realized that that was the next iteration of a failed education app company. So the whole thing started, they were trying – go ahead.

Jesse Hirsh:

Well, I was going to say it's half that. Because the other half is China. That Bytedance, which is a Chinese company, they created something like this in China, and it was successful. And they wanted to bring it to the rest of the world. And they knew that there would be pushback, so they bought musically as a Trojan's horse to then put all of their AI into; and Musically gave them all the kids as users, which is what they wanted, but it was also a Trojan horse for their AI so that they could take this Chinese idea and conquer the world.

Mark Jeftovic:

Can we just quickly stick a pin on the phrase AI and say every time somebody on this show says AI, what we really mean are expert systems? Because AI in the thinking machine sense of the word doesn't really exist. But everybody kind of knows –

Jesse Hirsh:

Right. And that's where –

Mark Jeftovic:

Go on.

Jesse Hirsh:

That's where on the one hand, I think we should repeat that often. And that we can take for granted that when we say AI, we mean a bucket of technologies that are algorithmically driven, but involve machine learning models. Everything from facial recognition, to object

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detection, to analytics. So it's a big bucket of technology that as you correctly say, will never become conscious or smart, but that is driven by algorithms and data science.

Mark Jeftovic:

Charles, anything you want to say?

Charles Hugh Smith:

Yeah. Mark, I do want you to broach the subject of the surveillance – the topics that Jesse mentioned – the surveillance geopolitical things. I'd like to hear what both of you have to think about that. I'm going to introduce a sort of a side thing here on this fame and celebrity, and it's a fascinating topic to me, and all of us are on the fringes of some sort of celebrity in the sense that we have audiences that are larger than you know – like our moms and a few friends or whatever. And so we have a little bit of experience there on the margins, but when I think about fame and celebrity, I think: okay, when you've stripped away every legitimate social mobility ladder, then what's left? When you can't really get famous for being successful in the sense of accomplishing something, because the ladders – the rungs are all broken or the ladders rotted, you know?

And so you have to have extraordinary drive to succeed and be lucky, especially if you're sort of a marginal character like I would characterize myself. So if you don't have the massive brain power and drive to become a PhD in biochemistry, and an MD, and an attorney – oh and I'm also a concert pianist. And we all know these people exist. And so they've managed to climb up to this thing where they're a university professor and they're also an author. And of course, they're on every talk show because they're a university professor, and so they have the institutional backing. And so there's this whole little narrow on the pyramid, there's this top little thing where if you get into that institution, you know, I'm at the Brookings Institute or whatever, and I'm a professor and I'm an author and all this stuff. And I have 2200 scientific papers that I stamped what my grad student did, but I got my name first yay because I run the lab.

All that sort of madness, which if you live in a university town, which I did. In Berkeley, you're absorbed, you absorb all of that craziness that goes into trying to make it in a world where there's an oversupply of talent, credentials, diplomas, and just backbiting greed. I mean those are all in massive surplus. And so what's scarce is something legitimate. A legitimate accomplishment. And so, then we enter this whole weird realm of so much of

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what passes for accomplishment today in this sphere of institutionalized fame or access to fame is it's a simulacrum.

It's not actually an accomplishment. Like 90 something, 99% of all scientific papers are never read by anybody but the author and the editor. And there's been this huge proliferation of these sort of bogus journals, That's just kind of what I'm referring to. So anyways, what does fame mean? It's kind of like the dregs, kind of like: My God, if this is all I have, then that's what I'll go for. And the fact that it's accessible means that it's still there. The ladder is still there.

Jesse Hirsh:

I wouldn't assume that the author has read their paper. I think you're giving them way too much, but I think you're touching on a literal metaviews here, right? It's something very meta. Which is the notion of fame, but you get down to its root. It's the notion of being known. And increasingly, people are known for being known, right? Like they're famous for being famous, because that's kind of the Kardashians, right? That the Kardashians have no substance to their power other than the fact that they're famous, so they're famous for being famous.

And Tiktok has a very interesting and relevant parallel which is the D'Amelio family. Charli D'Amelio, this young girl who just turned 16 – and I'm pretty sure she is the most followed person on Tiktok – I think she has maybe 60 million followers. Like it's tens of millions of followers. Her older sister, Dixie D'Amelio has I think 30 or 40 or 50 million followers. Their parents now have tens of millions of followers, and the D'Amelio family, they will within the next three months – if this is the first time that you guys have heard of them this will not be the last – they're going to have a reality TV show.

Mark Jeftovic:

I have a 14 year old daughter. I've heard of them.

Jesse Hirsh:

Yeah. And they are going to be the next Kardashians. Dixie D'Amelio just released a song that was number one video on YouTube the day it was released. And it is remarkable

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how there is nothing to them – with all due respect D’Amelio clan – but there is nothing to these people. Charli’s a fantastic dancer. Dixie has lots of talent, but they do not compare to the people you were referring to, Charles, in terms of some of the accomplished dancers or accomplished musicians out there.

No, the D’Amelio clan, like the Kardashian clan, is famous for being famous. And it is this paradox of being known for being known. And how those feedback loops happen I think is the kind of right place, right time magic of the internet and social media in our age. There are other people who have held that moment and that place in time, for the right reasons or the wrong reasons, but it is a simulation. It’s entirely a simulation. It’s meant to absorb our attention, so that we forget to bring this discussion back full circle.

Why I think that there is anxiety and neurosis and depression in our land, it’s because we are witnessing the rise of authoritarianism in real time, and we feel powerless to do anything about it. It’s fucking terrifying. It’s why most people are afraid, especially literate people who have read books and study history, because they look at what’s going on and they go: Oh my God, why are we not jumping out of the pot? We boiling frogs. And that’s why people are going nuts. And what is fascinating about the breads and circuses? What’s fascinating about the society of the spectacle which in the digital age, is a simulation? It offers us the D’Amelios or the Kardashians as the bread and circuses. They are the distraction that keeps us away from our friends in Portland getting into the streets and saying: we’re fed up, we can’t take it anymore.

And that’s part of the brilliance of Tiktok. That it is the opiate of the masses. That it is the ultimate distraction. The ultimate narcotic that’s able to assure people in ways that ironically – and this is where Tiktok brings us to the geopolitics – where Facebook and Twitter and YouTube, it’s easy to point out their political bias, it’s easy to identify when they’ve censored a video or when they’ve suppressed a voice; on Tiktok, it’s a full black box. You don’t know when contents been suppressed, you don’t know when a user has been shadow banned.

Tiktok has already had scandals in which whether it’s videos about Tiananmen Square, or videos of XinJiang, or videos about Hong Kong, or I think even videos about the US protest, the company has already been accused and found guilty in the court of public opinion of censoring these videos, but it’s hard to find the proof. And that’s where interestingly enough, everyone on Tiktok claims that they’ve been censored. Everyone on Tiktok is like: my video’s been taken down or I’ve been banned or I’ve been kicked off.

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So everyone sounds like they're living in an authoritarian society, where the Gestapo's just around the corner, the Stasi is looking in. They all know it. They'll talk about it. But because fame, as you correctly pointed out, Charles, the last opportunity for social mobility, because they feel fame is right at their fingertips.

They keep on making videos. They keep on doing the little routine. Because in spite of the authoritarianism, they all hope that they will be the exception to the rule. And they too, can be the next Charli D'Amelio or whoever. Because you know, if you start googling Charli, you start looking at how much her family's making off her fame. It's ridiculous. Like hundreds of thousands of dollars per Tiktok post. Because that's what having that kind of an audience can get you in the attention economy. So it's all surreal. And we still really haven't gotten into the China stuff.

So Mark, why don't you take us down that particular geopolitical path?

Mark Jetovic:

I'll try to get us there, but a couple of points first. So Em and I were talking about the D'Amelios a few weeks ago; because I was telling her, you know Em, what are you and all your friends going to do if Tiktok gets banned? And she said, yeah, I know it might get banned. And I guess everyone's going to move on to something else or something. And she says, you know, the D'Amelios, they'll probably just show up on YouTube and just go from there. And she said it and I thought about it. And I said to her, you know something Em? People don't appreciate the exact delicacy of the circumstances that propel an event to a high apogee.

So it's the same analogy that – and for some reason, Alice Cooper band comes to mind because we put them in the tail, the outro of last week's edition. And I had a thought on that. But anyway, the Alice Cooper band was the greatest, the most popular band in the world in the mid-70's. And then a couple guys said, well, we want to go solo and stuff like this. And so you quit the Alice Cooper band and you think I'm going to get a record deal. I'm going to be known. I'm going to have some hit songs because I was the bass player in the Alice Cooper band, and nobody cares. And so, all these careers kind of fizzle.

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So back to the D'Amelios. Yeah, they're the number one Tiktok stars honors right now, but I'll bet you – I mean, Jesse, you said the one song went number one on one day, but I bet you –

Jesse Hirsh:

Yeah. No, they –

Mark Jeftovic:

I don't know if it would sustain. I don't know if they would go from being the number one Tiktok star to being the number one YouTube star, because I think there's a sensitive dependence on the ecosystem out of which you're propelled. And if you take that ecosystem away and change it, it will not be a lateral move. In that sense.

Jesse Hirsh:

I 100% agree with your premise, but let me push back in saying the difference between them and the Alice Cooper band is the difference between scarcity and abundance. Because the 70's was still an era of media scarcity.

Mark Jeftovic:

Right.

Jesse Hirsh:

Versus now, it's media abundance. And I agree with you about the nuance between ecosystems, and that there are a lot of instances of people who failed to migrate, but because migrating – or to bring it back to where Em couched it – hedging your bets, in case of being banned, the management teams and the behind the scenes people, they're well into that.

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So the D'Amelios have already conquered YouTube. They are already the Queens of YouTube. That's been done. And while you're right, that the rise of these stars in one medium or one platform is very specific to that ecosystem or culture, their desire to translate that into an empire is so that those methods are so refined.

The people who do that are so well-developed, the industry that parents will pay to have their kids do that is so mature. That by the time you hear about them, they've already diversified so much, it's ludicrous. Because for example, this is where I think Donald Trump and Mark Zuckerberg are colluding, the biggest beneficiary of the threat ban of Tiktok is Instagram. Because all these Tiktokers are just promoting their Instagram accounts and translating their Tiktok capital into Instagram capital, which fundamentally benefits Mark Zuckerberg.

Mark Jeftovic:

Right.

Charles Hugh Smith:

Yeah. I want to bust in here before we may have to put aside the geopolitical stuff to next time because –

Mark Jeftovic:

It's okay. We're on a –

Charles Hugh Smith:

I want to mention this how this can be monetized, because I think that fame or celebrity quasi, in whatever state is appealing in it of itself, but then it also can be monetized. So I want to mention three quick things that I've run across in the last year or so.

One is in LA, being an entertainment capital; there are these huge conferences of YouTube stars, if you will.

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Jesse Hirsh:

VidCon.

Charles Hugh Smith:

Yeah. Yeah. And I was tempted to go, but I didn't have the energy and stuff, but that would be fantastic to show up and be there in that ecosystem.

So I just wanted to mention that if people are not aware of these ecosystems that we're describing, as you say Jesse, they are extremely developed. And so there are Hollywood agents are now seeking influencers and so on as a way to glom onto their income stream. So in terms of influencers, I think that's the term that's out there, but in other words, how do you monetize what you're doing once you get an audience?

And I read a fascinating account, which I can't recall what journal was in it, but it was about a teenage girl who started posting photos, I think on Instagram, of her outfit for that day at school. And this thing took off. And then she brilliantly managed this to where she became an influencer and was invited to parties, and with repping cosmetic companies and stuff – made a huge amount of money, and then burned out. Like it all kind of like fell out – the sponsorships and her audience slipped, and so it's like the skyrocket phenomenon. And there will be people who are able to figure out how to keep it going for longer. But there is a certain kind of skyrocket characteristic to this. And my last thing is, Jesse you know that company, maybe Mark you do too. There's a phenomenon where you can have like a sort of faded celebrity text...

Jesse Hirsh:

Cameo.

Charles Hugh Smith:

Yeah.

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Mark Jeftovic:

Yeah I used that actually for Em's graduation. I got Michael Franti to send her a graduation thing and it was amazing. Like I cried when I saw the thing he did for Em's graduation. Because she was so upset that graduation was cancelled cause of COVID, and it was amazing. 250 bucks or 450 or whatever, you know. Sorry go on.

Charles Hugh Smith:

When I was tempted – No, no, no. I think that in other words, we're talking about monetizing celebrity, and it can be fairly modest. The Doonesbury writer lampooned this because he has this character Boopsie, who was like a starlet 30 years ago in Hollywood. And so she's on this platform now and she says yes, remember I was the fourth girl in Porky's Five, you know, but well, and so I was tempted.

I read somewhere that you can get Chuck Norris to text you for like X number of dollars. Wasn't a lot of money, but of course I'm thinking, is it really Chuck Norris? Of course not. It's his third assistant or the number 12 in his organization who's going to text you. So then there are all these layers of well, what is your access to that celebrity? You know that to get the video, well then okay. You know, you're going to pay much more for that, but if you just want to tweet, hey, it's affordable, so –

Jesse Hirsh:

Well, and to what you alluded to the depth of this ecosystem is remarkable. And I say that with the tongue in cheek that it's all pretty superficial crack. But there is a remarkable number of people who are in that attention economy who are trying quite successfully to be influencers. And also, I have written a couple of metaviews issues where I looked at some of the mental health research around both the mental health impacts of aspiring influencers who are unsuccessful, because just like sports, most people who aspire to be a professional athlete, fail. Most people who aspire to be a professional influencer fail. And that failure often comes with devastating psychological effect. But even on influencers themselves, there's a tremendous toll. And you know, I mean it's worth coaching influencers within the showbiz industry, within the entertainment industry, because you know, entertainment, just like professional sports, we do recognize that it takes a toll.

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Whether it's a professional association on the entertainment or the sports side, they have pensions, they have mental health programs, they have support services, because they recognize that if you're a professional athlete, your body is finished when you're done. And if you're a professional entertainer, there are a lot of issues – mental health issues that come with it. That comes with your career. That comes in the way in which that ends. So I think you're really touching upon a future crisis there Charles, that all of these young people who are living in the moment now, in their Tiktok fame, are going to have a hard time at university when they're just some kid like everyone else. And they can't deal with the letdown of being a somebody and then being a nobody, because eventually we're all nobodies, right? That's the nature of fame. That's the nature of entertainment.

Mark Jeftovic:

That's the corollary of someday, everybody will be famous for 15 minutes is eventually, we'll all be nobodies afterward.

Jesse Hirsh:

Yeah. Yeah.

It's, it's the boom bust cycle of the attention economy. And everyone focuses on the boom and we sweep the bus underneath the rug, but there is a growing amount of interesting scholarly literature around the mental health impacts of influencers as a more exaggerated example of the mental health of social media, which is where we start, which is sort of how we started thinking about the extent to which whether as a narcotic, either as junk food, or whether as a fabric of our society, the extent to which social media does us harm as well as doing us good.

Mark Jeftovic:

Well, I wasn't even thinking about this until the last couple of minutes as you're talking about it, is I realized how social media brings out the narcissism in us, because all of the brands are personal brands. Most of the brands are personal brands. I mean, we have countless examples of what happens to childhood stars and one hit wonders and flash in the pans and stuff like that, but in a lot of cases, or at least in more cases, all of those traditional ascensions and declines, it may not be tied to an individual identity. It could be

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a magazine, it could be a band, it could be a fashion house, but now it's all names, it's all the D'Amelios, the Cyruses, and the Kardashians. And suddenly, you're just –you're this one person that was famous.

And then how do you get a job at middle management of Walmart 20 years later when the first thing they say to you in your job interview is: Oh, weren't you like the D'Amelio kid? I mean, it's – but that's – go ahead. Go ahead.

Jesse Hirsh:

So there's this YouTuber iDubbbz, his first name is Ian, he's a really controversial figure, but he just released the documentary last week about someone who, in the early days of YouTube, was YouTube famous and had a huge channel, and then kind of disappeared into obscurity. And iDubbbz decided: I want to find out what happened to this guy. And he got tens of millions of views on this documentary because the story of that one hit wonder in the YouTube age, to your point, is fascinating and complicated. And the guy works at an ice cream parlor scooping ice cream, but it suggests there's going to be many, many people with such a fate where not only do they have this obscure sense of fame, but when you put their name into Google, that fame is the number one result.

Yeah. So you never escape it. You never get away from it.

Mark Jeftovic:

Do you remember the band Warrant? And they had a hit song called Cherry Pie? And I saw a documentary about one hit wonders years later, and the poor guy, it looked like it destroyed his life. He started telling the story about how long the band was trying to struggle, and then one night he had to literally rip a song out of his ass for something the next day. And he came up with Cherry Pie, and the song just exploded, and it defined the band. And after a while, it's like, but wait a minute, we don't want to be defined by this one song. And he was almost getting teary eyed at the end. It's like, well, now it's this. And now I'm the Cherry Pie guy. And that's all anybody cares about and –

Jani Lane of the band Warrant, VH1 interview clip, 2005:

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“I hate that song. I had no intention of writing that song. The record was done. The record was called Uncle Tom's Cabin, and Danny and I were called up and said, I don't hear the single, you got to give me a f***** single like Love In An Elevator. I need something like that. So that night, I wrote Cherry Pie, sent it to him. He lived with it over the weekend, and all of a sudden, the album's called Cherry Pie. The record's called Cherry Pie. I'm doing Cherry Pie eating contests, the single's Cherry Pie, right? If I'm lying, I'm dying. And my legacy's Cherry Pie, everything about me is Cherry Pie. I'm Cherry Pie guy.

I could shoot myself in the f***** head for writing that song.”

Mark Jeftovic:

And I was looking at that saying man, that's a rough way to go out, especially if you had a body of work that you were proud of along the way.

Charles Hugh Smith:

Well, I have two suggestions to kind of wrap up my contribution here. One is I saw some article, the Evergreen article of comparing the decline of the Roman Empire – the Western Roman empire in the US, and apparently, the athletes who survived the games and the chariot races were extremely well-paid. In today's money, they were paid like a billion dollars. I mean they earned a billion dollars. So that extreme of rewarding celebrity seems to be kind of the end of the empire things.

And my last suggestion is, I think we should propose and put it out there on that platform that for X amount of dollars, we will insert your name in our Salon, and we'll make a little funny drawing and hold it up with your name on it and stuff like that. And then, you'll get like at least 30 seconds. Well, let's do a Tiktok. We'll give you 60 seconds of prime time.

Jesse Hirsh:

No but see, this is the absurdity of many of these platforms. That's called advertising or sponsorship. We don't need an intermediary to facilitate that. People can approach us directly.

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Speaking of which – Mark, we are expecting mail from Mike from Santa Fe, New Mexico who did send us cash in the mail. So let us know if that mail shows up so that not only Mike can see on air that we received it, but so that other people can know that you could send us cash.

Mark Jeftovic:

We can make one of those YouTube videos of like: you want to get cash sent to you in the mail? Get on our platform and we'll show you how people will send you cash in the mail.

Jesse Hirsh:

But back to my point, it strikes me and this is part of the paradox of the gig economy or the hustle economy.

I wrote my metaphors about this today, that in many cases we're just remixing old stuff, and a platform is just taking a cut. They're just trying to insert themselves as a middleman. And sometimes, you don't need the middleman. And I think that's where Cameo is interesting because you're monetizing people who were previously famous, who still have some kitsch, but the problem is they were previously famous. They're not still famous. Versus an influencer who – this is their moment. This is what they're doing. And I think the way in which the attention economy monetizes, the full life range of someone's light kind of suggests that maybe, parents are going to be taking out future contracts on the potential fame of their children, or the future contracts of –

Mark Jeftovic:

That's not far-fetched at all.

Jesse Hirsh:

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No. I think it's quite disturbingly possible. In fact, maybe that's the bit that where we should start –

MarkJeftovic:

Because I mean artists already do that, right? Like they already sell future sales on advances on their royalties and stuff like that. I was thinking the phrase that kept coming into my mind while we're talking about all this is this is child abuse. The way some families push their kids out there to be influencers and stuff. And you kind of see it behind the scenes when you're raising a kid, and you're kind of taking her to dance lessons and stuff, and you see some of the parents that are a little over overeager on getting their kid out there front and center, and you kind of tell they're kind of working up the food chain, and it's kind of sad to see. And you know -

Jesse Hirsh:

Although for the record, we do acknowledge that in many of these cases, it's the kid who wants it. It's the parent who should have stopped them. It's the parent who should've said no, maybe you shouldn't be doing that, because that's not really healthy.

Mark Jeftovic:

I think maybe it's 50/50. I think sometimes, the kid would rather just be playing with Legos, and the parents are like no, but you're going to be this.

Jesse Hirsh:

No but when it comes to the really successful influencers and YouTube stars, I think if the kid wasn't into it, it would show; and that would be either part of the spectacle, or those kids would just not be as compelling.

Mark Jeftovic:

Right.

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Jesse Hirsh:

I'm not saying – I agree with you a hundred percent. I think the parents are cracking the whip and behind them all the way. But I think in many cases, the kids are drinking the Kool-Aid too, because if they weren't, they wouldn't be as compelling entertainment.

Mark Jeftovic:

Well, it's very seductive. I mean, if you see a path, what 12 year old is not going to take that path if it seems to be an opening through it, you know? Yeah.

Jesse Hirsh:

Yeah. All the kids I know in my family, they all want to be famous. They have no clue what that means.

Mark Jeftovic:

I wanted to be a rock star. You know, the 1960, 70's version. I wanted to be a rock star. What if you're not a rockstar? Oh, I'm not going to fail. Can't fail. Going to make it.

Jesse Hirsh:

It's the culture of narcissism combined with the false promise of show business. That it's all glamorous and –

But anyway, we digress China next week.

Mark Jeftovic:

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I know. Next week we're supposed to have Adam B. Levine from Let's Talk Bitcoin on. So we might have to save it for a future episode.

Jesse Hirsh:

So crypto currency China next week. Tiktok China the week after.

Charles Hugh Smith:

Sounds good. So Mark, do your magic with the title. I'm thinking seductive social mobility.

Mark Jeftovic:

I was something around... well, I'll surprise you guys. So...I was going to –

Jesse Hirsh:

Black box time.

Mark Jeftovic:

Yeah well, I was thinking something along like derealization and something about the Wetiko maybe or something. I don't know. Just that sort of –

Jesse Hirsh:

So you want no one to watch the video. Is that what you're saying?

Mark Jeftovic:

True. Okay.

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Jesse Hirsh:

Anyways, post a comment, hit the like button, follow us on Tiktok.

Mark JEftovic:

Yeah. Follow Jesse on Tiktok and yeah, go to our website I suppose. And hit the like button, and we'll see you guys all next week.

[closing credits]