

The public life of *The Social Dilemma*

Silicon Valley's mea culpa moment and the rise of tech-dissidents

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ABSTRACT

The 2020 documentary film *The Social Dilemma*, produced by Netflix, is one of several examples of Big Tech critiques that have emerged in recent years. At the time of writing, it is the second most watched documentary Netflix has ever released, reaching 38 million viewers in 28 days. The film provides a scathing condemnation of Facebook, Google, and others, and acts as an admission of guilt for former central figures in the industry. The fact that Netflix, a Big Tech company itself, produced the film gives it an ambivalent status. In this chapter, we present a qualitative analysis of how the *The Social Dilemma* was received on social media, comparing its reception in the US and Denmark. We highlight how dominant discourses were composed both of praise for the film's main message as well as critiques of its creators. Such critiques display a widespread scepticism of both positive and negative portraits of Big Tech coming out of Silicon Valley.

KEYWORDS: techlash, Big Tech, data ethics, social media, critique

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Introduction

How digital devices and platforms impact society is a topic that emerges with increasing regularity not only in public debate and political deliberations, but also in films, theatre, and art. Documentaries concerned with how digital technologies and online platforms play a significant role in our lives often surge in the wake of scandals and controversies such as the Snowden leaks or the Cambridge Analytica files (see Helles & Lomborg, Chapter 2 in this volume), and hence, they play an important role in shaping public debates about digital technologies. In this chapter, we look at the public life of one such documentary film, how responses to it exemplify current public sentiments toward the world of Big Tech, and how discussions about the so-called techlash become framed through the medium of the documentary format.

The Social Dilemma (Orlowski, 2020) is a self-described documentary-drama hybrid that “reveals how social media is reprogramming civilization with tech experts sounding the alarm on their own creations”, as is stated on the film’s accompanying website (www.thesocialdilemma.com). The film has been applauded as a notable public culture example of the so-called techlash, or digital backlash, focusing on the manipulative trade secrets of social media platforms and Big Tech companies. In doing so, the film aims to sound the alarm against the impact that online platforms and digital technologies have on everyday life and urge a move towards more disconnection practices, for instance, turning off notifications and deleting one’s social media accounts. Yet the film has also received a host of criticisms, in some cases from media and social science scholars, as well as some sceptical responses on social media and in the mass media, albeit to a smaller degree compared with scholarly critiques.

In this chapter, we discuss the film as a type of mea culpa tech criticism by the way it puts emphasis on how former tech entrepreneurs and executives, who have transformed themselves into tech-dissidents, in some respect admit their own guilt and complicity, by analysing public responses on social media, as well as reviews and criticisms published in the news media. The question that concerns us is not whether the film correctly analyses Shoshanna Zuboff’s (2019) notion of surveillance capitalism, whether it rightly addresses the current woes of the digital platform economy, nor whether the solutions it proposes can ameliorate the current “crisis of attention” (Pedersen et al., 2021; Williams, 2018) – although these are important discussions. Rather, we are interested in how *The Social Dilemma* exemplifies a wider social concern with digital devices and platforms, and how it can be considered an instantiation of what Phan and colleagues (2022) have described as an emerging “economics of virtue” in the world of Big Tech. Or, in an inversed way, how confessions of former tech employees such as those presented in the film signify what Karppi and Nieborg (2021) called “Silicon Valley dystopianism”, and how public and scholarly responses to the film exemplify the role of documentaries in the debate about digital platforms.

In other words, if digital devices and platforms have become a general matter of concern, to borrow phrasing from Latour (2004), around which discussions, controversies, panics, and critiques are emerging, how does *The Social Dilemma* exemplify and express this? And, equally important, which, if any, public discourses have emerged as responses to the film as indications of public opinion against Big Tech? By investigating the public life of the film in the form of its reception, we aim to show how it taps into a digital backlash zeitgeist, whereby concerns over limiting the use of mobile phones and screens in general become tied to larger political discussions of the business models of Big Tech companies.

The chapter begins with an introduction to the film, detailing its arguments, the characters, and its documentary-drama hybrid style. We then briefly discuss a few criticisms of the film that academic scholars have made in reviews and commentaries. Next, we trace the different public conversations that took place when the film was first made available on Netflix. We do this via three different datasets: first, a preliminary focus group with Danish high school students that gave us a first indication of responses to the film; second, a Twitter (now X) dataset consisting of tweets collected via the platform's API, used to analyse responses to posts made by the profiles representing the film, as well as by searching for central keywords and hashtags in conjunction with the film to elucidate which themes responses on Twitter focused on; and third, a set of news articles from Danish newspapers and media outlets commenting and reporting on the film and responses to it. By analysing these datasets together, we aim to gauge whether it was the messages of the film, or rather its genre or style – and especially the role of tech-dissidents – that primarily prompted public reactions. As a conclusion, we compare these different responses to the film, leading us to a discussion about how the film can be considered a new instantiation of the techlash, namely as a kind of mea culpa, self-referring tech-dissidence, in which tech leaders, testifying to their transgressions, become the symbols of a corrupted industry.

***The Social Dilemma* film**

The Social Dilemma was directed by Jeff Orlowski, who has also produced and directed two documentaries on climate change. And indeed, Orlowski, along with the main protagonist of the film, Tristan Harris from the Center for Humane Technology, has been known to equate the challenges of social media and the digital platform economy with that of climate change (Harris & Raskin, 2019). *The Social Dilemma* seeks to address a wide and general audience, with the explicit aim of raising awareness about the consequences of the current business models of social media platforms and their parent tech companies. The wish to address a wide audience is perhaps why it was also produced by and launched on Netflix, a somewhat ironic point which we return to later.

The film is divided into two styles or genres of communicating its messages: an interview-based storyline and a fictional storyline. In the former, we are presented with interviews of a range of university experts, former Silicon Valley tech executives, and notable Internet entrepreneurs. This includes a discussion of how psychological and neurolinguistic principles are being applied to capture and retain the attention of platform users, creating a craving for scrolling news feeds akin to that of a drug addiction. The film also addresses questions related to the downstream negative effects of social media, especially for young people, in the form of depression, anxiety, and suicide. In doing so, the film draws on several academic experts from various fields, including Jonathan Haidt, social psychologist at the New York University Stern School of Business, and co-author of *The Coddling of the American Mind* (2018); Anna Lembke, medical director of addiction medicine at Stanford University; and Shoshana Zuboff, Professor Emeritus at Harvard Business School, author of the widely read book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019). This book describes how Big Tech companies compile the online data of users as behavioural surplus, which is then sold as data commodities. As is well known, Zuboff was by no means the first to make this point (e.g., Couldry & Mejias, 2019), yet the book's huge public reach has made it the face of the new criticism of Big Tech and social media – a critique which *The Social Dilemma* is also a clear-cut example of. Hence, Zuboff's prominent role in the film seeks to give it “academic weight”.

Yet, the gallery of characters who have the most screen time in the interview-based part of the film – and which is arguably also the most interesting – is that of former tech executives and employees who have now become critics of their past employers. The gallery is quite substantial, and includes the following:

- Tristan Harris, former Google design ethicist, co-founder of the Center for Humane Technology
- Tim Kendall, former Facebook executive
- Jaron Lanier, computer scientist and author of *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* (2018)
- Roger McNamee, early investor at Facebook and author of *Zucked* (2020)
- Aza Raskin, co-founder of the Center for Humane Technology
- Justin Rosenstein, former lead engineer at Facebook and product manager at Google
- Cathy O'Neil, former Wall Street employee, data scientist, and author of *Weapons of Math Destruction* (2016)
- Jeff Seibert, former executive at Twitter, serial tech entrepreneur, and co-founder of Digits

- Chamath Palihapitiya, former vice president of growth at Facebook
- Sean Parker, former president at Facebook
- Sandy Parakilas, former operations manager at Facebook and former product manager at Uber

Through the interviews, the audience is presented with a host of background information about how digital platforms work, how psychological tools are used to retain the attention of people using these platforms, and how Big Tech is intentionally exploiting the seemingly unending craving for scrolling through content on smartphones.

In the fictional storyline, we follow an American family consumed by smartphones and social media. The two main characters are the son (portrayed by Skyler Gisondo) and the daughter (portrayed by Sophia Hammons), who, each in their own way, struggle with constantly being drawn to their phones and confronted with online hate speech and false information through social media. An addition to this storyline is a series of scenes shot within what appears to be a maleficent social media company's algorithm, personified by Vincent Kartheiser, that feeds the son of the family with tailor-made content and notifications aiming to manipulate his attention to fixate on his smartphone. This portrayal of an almost James Bond villain type of evil is, as we show later, the subject of much criticism of the film.

The film ends with the interviewed experts and tech entrepreneurs giving their own opinions on how the growing impact of social media and surveillance capitalism on everyday life can be confronted. Such suggestions are mostly framed as being about setting screen-time limits for oneself and one's family, or about turning off notifications on one's digital devices, thereby limiting the degree of digital distractions one is exposed to. Some suggestions for political reform of the Big Tech industry (e.g., through regulation and taxation reform) are mentioned, but these are generally few and much less concrete than the suggestions for action to be taken by individuals and families.

The Social Dilemma is in some respects unique due to its hybrid genre format, but it is also part of a very recognisable trend of tech-critical films in recent years. The 2019 documentary *The Great Hack* delves into the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which created shock ripples throughout the tech world and can be seen as a pivotal moment in the turn towards Big Tech criticism (see also Helles & Lomborg, Chapter 2 in this volume). The 2020 film *Coded Bias* discusses how algorithms are designed with bias flaws and how we might change current algorithmic practices. In a distinctly different genre, *The Circle*, from 2017, is a fictional take on the global reach and power of social media, depicting a young, new employee (portrayed by Emma Watson) at a tech company resembling Facebook, which seeks to become the all-encompassing platform through which people interact, personified by its megalomaniac CEO (portrayed by Tom Hanks). Other films and movies aiming

to showcase the dark side of social media and Silicon Valley include *Terms and Conditions May Apply* (2013), *Citizenfour* (2014), *The Cleaners* (2018), and *Brexit: The Uncivil War* (2019). These films are each unique in their own way, yet they also represent recognisable genres such as documentaries (e.g., *The Great Hack*), fiction (e.g., *The Circle*), or movies based on true stories (e.g., *Brexit: The Uncivil War*).

The Social Dilemma has two design features that are worth noting. First, the film fluctuates between the two storylines of 1) a more classical, testimonial based documentary of experts and insiders telling viewers how the world really works, and 2) the fictional story of a family – exemplifying society at large – being negatively impacted by social media. This fluctuation between a classic documentary and a fictional story makes it difficult to pinpoint what type of film genre the movie follows.

Second, by using the voices of former tech executives and engineers turned ethical thinkers, the film almost resembles a tribunal of former culprits now admitting their guilt. While this angle is meant to convey sensation and uniqueness – the fact that so many former top tech people participate is quite impressive – it also seems like the film’s creators wanted to make the film noticeable simply by showcasing the sheer number of former tech people willing to speak out, without much variation between what these characters have to say.

These characteristics of the film have also been noted by academics responding to it, leading to a range of critiques of its depiction of the impact that the tech industry has on people’s lives. Five of these criticisms are worth noting here. First, with respect to the fictional storyline showing the personified algorithm of a manipulative social media company, critics have noted that the film seems to contradict itself by making this depiction while at the same time claiming that nobody knows what is going on behind the scenes of Big Tech companies and social media platforms (Mansell, 2020). Second, some commentators highlighted that themes such as the working conditions of the employees at Big Tech companies are overlooked (Du, 2021; Murdock, 2020). A third prevalent criticism is that, while the film succeeds in describing the problems and symptoms, it does not offer any real solutions to users apart from a few points of advice, such as turning off notifications (Du, 2021). Fourth, the fact that the film is produced by and broadcast on Netflix – a major global streaming platform – is conspicuous, given its lack of suggestions for broader structural changes with respect to tech policies (Na, 2021). Fifth, the role of former tech executives and employees, turned tech-dissidents, is both a cause for praise and an object of criticism in the eyes of commentators (e.g., Mansell, 2020). As Mansell noted, for instance, the problem is that these tech-dissidents become portrayed as the saviours of our current perils, while they are also the source of that peril to begin with: “the main message is of dystopian individual disempowerment that might be rescued by enlightened technology designers finding their way to the ‘tech for good’ design ethos of a not-so-distant past” (Mansell, 2020: 87).

These critiques indicate that for some observers, there is a paradoxical relation between the kinds of issues that the film focuses on, related to social media and surveillance capitalism, as well as its framing of these issues, and the types of voices represented in the film. In the following section, we outline how we ventured out to study public responses to the film on social media and in the news media.

Methods and datasets

In our analysis, we draw on three different datasets that complement one another in our attempt to gauge public responses to *The Social Dilemma*: a preliminary focus group, a Twitter dataset from the US and Denmark, and a sample of news media articles. The latter two datasets were limited to 1 September–15 November 2020, demarcating the period from the launch of the film to a point in time when the initial responses to it were ebbing. In this section, we describe our justification for the methods used and the datasets that they produced, as well as how the data collection was carried out. For the purposes of this chapter, we have translated any quotes not originally in English.

Preliminary focus group

As a preliminary point of departure before our data collection began in earnest, we carried out a short survey and a focus-group interview with five last-year high-school students who had watched the film. We did this short pilot investigation to explore which themes we would start sampling for in the social media and news media datasets, and to contextualise the reactions found online. Since the dramatised elements of the film revolve around the social media use of two young people – the preteen Isla and the high-school student Ben – one of the main target audiences (or, at least, the group identified as most vulnerable) seems to be the younger generations. This is corroborated by a main theme of the documentary being the effect social media has on youth.

The immediate reactions of the high-school students we interviewed in the focus group included that the film was “thought-provoking”, “scary”, “informational”, and “surprising”. In a short survey we sent to the students before the focus group, they all gave the film 4–5 stars on a 5-point scale and indicated that they agreed or highly agreed with the sentiment that the film made them uneasy about their social media use. With regard to negative reactions, the students commented on the dramatised elements of the film, remarking that they found it Americanised and “too much”, “propaganda-like”, and that it “took away from the seriousness of the topic”. However, they did report that the effect was nonetheless captivating and impactful. This is one of the critiques that distinguish reactions coming from the Danish context versus the American context (as shown later). Another critique brought forth by the

students was that the film only showed “one side” of the debate, touching upon the film’s predominant use of tech-dissidents. From these initial findings from the focus group, we compiled three themes that instructed our analysis of the Twitter posts and the news media articles: positive but frightened reactions, critiques of the film, and solutions outlined by the public.

Twitter dataset

In moving towards gathering a larger body of data, we decided to focus solely on Twitter (now called X),¹ as this platform is designed to share posts publicly and therefore provides a point of departure for gaining an understanding of public responses to the film. It should be noted that each social media platform has a specific demographic of users, and therefore one platform cannot be said to represent public opinion, as such (Rafail, 2018). The demographic on Twitter tends to be educated and urban-based and the platform facilitates a short-text style of posting (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Further, Twitter is known for attracting opinion-makers. We therefore take the reactions of users on Twitter as a tentative proxy of the reactions of opinion-makers and a group of social media users to the film’s critique of social media platforms.

A Twitter dataset was created, containing reactions from Denmark and the US. While we focus on the Danish context throughout and across the different datasets, in the Twitter dataset, we downloaded American tweets as well to gauge the differences and similarities between Denmark and the US, where the film was produced and takes place. The data was downloaded through Twitter’s API, using a Python script to automate the download. It consists of tweets either mentioning “social dilemma”, using the hashtag “#socialdilemma”, or tagging the official Twitter profile of the film, “@SocialDilemma”. The dataset includes posts between 1 September and 15 November 2020, thus spanning from one week before until two months after the launch of the film on 9 September 2020. Tweets were excluded from analysis if they were not written in Danish or English, using Twitter’s own language detector. The dataset was created by using American and Danish location tags on user profiles and, in the case of Denmark, additional tweets written in Danish by users without a location tag were included. This resulted in a dataset of 34,912 tweets from the US and 357 tweets from Denmark.

Danish news media articles

The final dataset consists of Danish news media articles that either reviewed or reported on *The Social Dilemma*. As traditionally powerful agenda-setting institutions when it comes to public discourse, we deemed it important to include news media articles. We identified and downloaded a total of 22 articles mentioning *The Social Dilemma* from 1 September–15 November 2020. We excluded articles where the mention of the film was part of to-watch lists

with no further commentary. Table 4.1 shows the distribution of the articles among genres.

TABLE 4.1. Number and type of news media articles analysed

Type of article	N
Review	6
Opinion piece	7
Article about the film with expert commentary	1
Other mentions (e.g., reports on Facebook’s response to the film)	8
Total	22

Discourse analysis approach

In analysing and interpreting the responses to *The Social Dilemma* across these disparate datasets, we employ a discourse analysis approach. We are interested in dissecting (Johnstone, 2017) statements, posts, and comments about the film to understand how individual words come to portray the film in specific ways in public discourse. In doing so, we are particularly interested in those aspects of discourse analysis that focus on word associations (which words appear together) and the sentiments of particular words – positive, negative, or neutral. Word associations guided our readings of the Twitter posts: Tweets containing particular words of interest were randomly sampled and read until no new themes emerged. In this way, we aim to provide a relatively simple, but broad content analysis which applies to both the Twitter data and the newspaper articles and which analyses how individual words and groups of words express specific opinions regarding the film.

Responses on Twitter

In this main section, we outline the results from our analysis of the Twitter dataset we compiled, focusing on three overall types of reactions: positive responses, negative responses, and discussions of solutions to the problem of social media, smartphones, and the crisis of attention. The distribution of tweets in the US and Denmark that we downloaded via the API can be seen in Figures 4.1a and 4.1b. As shown, Twitter attention on the topic peaked around the release of the film in early September, and then waned, with two smaller peaks in the beginning and end of October. This tendency is clearest among the American tweets, which there are more of, but can be seen mirrored in the Danish tweets. As Danish researchers, we were interested in exploring how reactions differed in Denmark versus the US. However, there were far fewer Danish tweets, making substantial comparisons difficult.

Throughout the analysis, we comment on notable differences, but, as many similarities were also found, the bulk of the analysis is made across tweets from both Denmark and the US.

FIGURE 4.1A Number of tweets about *The Social Dilemma* originating in the US

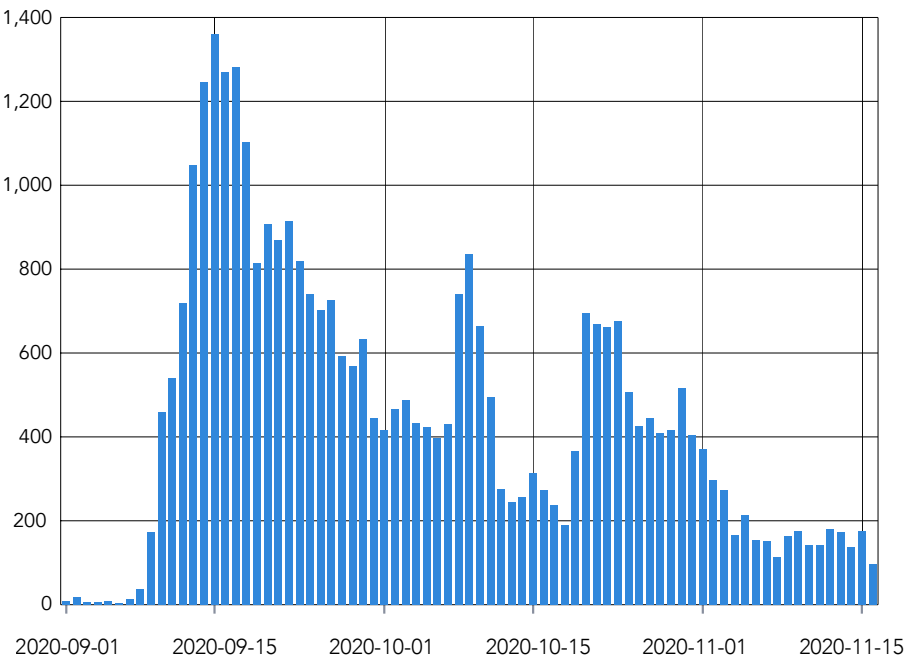
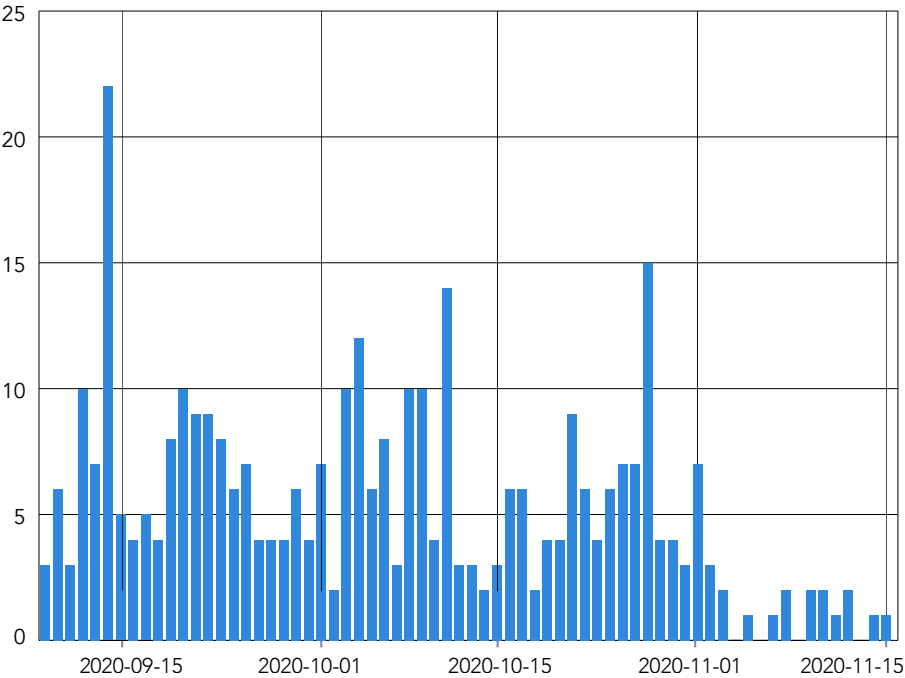
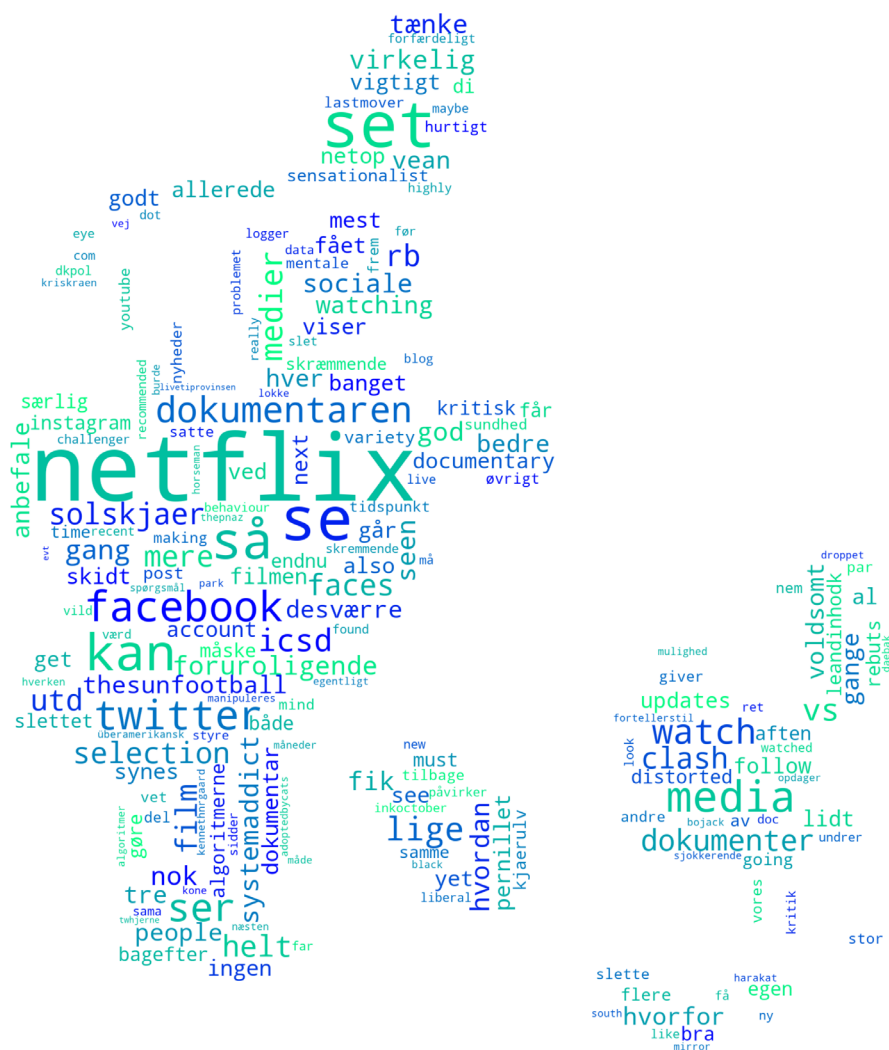


FIGURE 4.1B Number of tweets about *The Social Dilemma* originating in Denmark



In doing the analysis, we employed simple word frequency methods to isolate and examine themes in the Twitter dataset, primarily by qualitatively investigating random samples of tweets using the most frequent words or other words we deemed interesting based on our preliminary work with the focus group. While such focused reading of samples drawn from the dataset does not ensure complete representativeness of the data, it does ensure a satisfactory degree of confidence in the validity of the content analysis. Figures 4.2a and 4.2b show the most frequently tweeted words (with common words such as “the” and “and” removed). Retweets are included, meaning that if a tweet has been retweeted many times, the words used will have a higher frequency. We found this to be most representative of the reception, since retweets are often a sign of agreement with or acknowledgement of a sentiment.

FIGURE 4.2B The most frequent words in the Danish Twitter dataset



Comments: The words used in the frequency analysis of Danish tweets were not stemmed since the number of tweets were too few. The placements of the words do not reflect geographical differences within Denmark.

Positive responses: Liking the film, fearful of the future

Most reactions on Twitter were positive towards the film. As seen in Figures 4.2a and 4.2b, the most frequent words are, as expected, words like “watch”, “Netflix”, and “social media”. Moving past such generic words, the word “recommend” is the fifteenth most frequently used word among the American tweets, featuring in 1,309 tweets. Reading a sample of tweets using the word “recommend” reveals that most tweeters are either “highly”, “really”, or “10/10”² recommending others to watch *The Social Dilemma*. The film is also described as “eye-opening” and “thought-provoking”, and hashtagged as #mustwatch. The word “good” is also a frequent word, used in 1,100 tweets. These tweets comment that *The Social Dilemma* was a “good documentary” or reflect on feeling “good” after deleting social media. On the other hand, some tweets using the word “good” specifically comment that they do *not* think the film was good; however, reading a sample of the tweets using the word “good” suggests this is the minority. Finally, the seventh most frequent word among the American tweets, “everyone”, used 1,662 times, also describes mainly positive reactions. While this word is not as obviously positive as “recommend” and “good”, investigating tweets using this word shows that the majority are recommending “everyone” to watch *The Social Dilemma*, especially expressed in sentiments such as “everyone should watch”, “everyone NEEDS to watch”, and “everyone please watch” the film.

A dystopian perspective is also detectable in the dataset through expressions of alarm. The film is described as “scary” and “disturbing”, or is called a “horror movie” and likened to a “black mirror episode” (a science fiction anthology series that explores potential high-tech dystopian futures for humanity). An experienced loss of authenticity and presence due to the prevalence of social media is lamented, calling social media a “false world” and “not real life”, while quotes from the film are shared along with comments disapproving of what is experienced as superficial attitudes, where things are done “JUST to show it on social media”.

The film also prompted a backlash toward social media companies such as Facebook (mentioned 1,311 times in total in the American and Danish tweets) and Twitter (mentioned 1,201 times). Instagram and YouTube feature as well, although less frequently. Most tweets referencing these platforms are negative and, for instance, encourage people to “deactivate” Facebook along with the hashtag #deletefacebook. Since the dataset is from Twitter, many tweets mentioning Twitter are aimed at not being able to “take the leap with Twitter” (meaning, deleting Twitter) or comment on the irony of posting about a social media-critical film like *The Social Dilemma* on a platform like Twitter – a category of responses we return to later. The overwhelmingly positive – and alarmed – reception of the documentary can be considered an example of how strongly the digital backlash has shaped public discussion. Literature on digital disconnection has shown how the backlash has resulted

in self-help books focused on unplugging as well as digital detox retreats (Syvertsen & Enli, 2019). *The Social Dilemma* is also an instantiation of the digital backlash, cementing fear of a world with uncontrolled social media technologies. Further, while digital detox retreats may be for the few, *The Social Dilemma* reached a wide audience as the second most watched documentary on Netflix.

Negative responses: Liking the message, disliking the film

Negative reactions on Twitter are primarily directed not toward the main messages of *The Social Dilemma*, but rather toward the timing of release, the cinematic effects, and the people and the company behind the film. Concerning the timing of the release, the hashtag #lastmover, used in Danish tweets, encapsulates the reaction well. Critical Twitter users comment that they do not understand the hype, given that the messages presented in the film have been widely known for a long time.

Many also criticise the dramatisation of the documentary's message through the fictional storyline. These critiques are especially prominent among Danish tweets, but also appear in American tweets. In general, the Danish Twitter reactions, while limited, are characterised by being more critical of the film than the reactions coming from the US. The critiques centre on the dramatisation “cheapening the narrative” and doing a “disservice to the cause”, and that Netflix, through using a dramatised storyline, is “emotionally manipulating people” with misinformation, which, ironically, is exactly what the film denounces social media for doing.

Critiques of the contributing former tech executives and of Netflix, the company behind the film, focus, among other things, on capitalism as the real root of the negative turn of social media, and they criticise the film and its makers for not highlighting this more. Furthermore, the tech-dissidents featured in the film are called out as also using ads on social media for their companies (such as Asana, co-founded by interviewee Justin Rosenstein) and mocked for their vast fortunes – another not-so-subtle capitalism critique. Moreover, Twitter users point out that the film never mentions or critiques Netflix itself, which is flaunted as a double standard, since Netflix can be considered a Big Tech company in its own right. While these criticisms are much less frequent than the predominantly positive reactions the film received, they reveal a group of reactions in which the tech-dissidents' turn from Silicon Valley entrepreneur to ethical thinker is not accepted, and their tech crimes are not forgiven – at least not until they address the root problem of the system, which from this perspective is considered to be capitalism.

A few critiques centre on the message of *The Social Dilemma* as being a new moral panic seen before with other technologies or types of entertainment. For instance, two Twitter users latch onto a throw-away comment made by Tristan Harris on the lack of moral panic when bicycles became mainstream,

citing this as historically inaccurate. However, these critiques seem to be few and far between, with most users posting about the film – both positively and negatively – accepting its general message of social media as a major societal problem. What is mainly critiqued is the presentation of the message, not the message itself.

Discussing solutions: Delete, regulate, and joke

As we point out above, some academic reviewers critiqued *The Social Dilemma* for not discussing structural solutions to the problems presented, only urging that social media users should turn off notifications (e.g., Du, 2021). This type of critique can also be found on Twitter (e.g., the 140 tweets using the word “solution” mostly consist of people pointing to this exact issue) but is much less common than posts presenting individual attempts at solutions. In this section, we analyse the public reception of the solutions presented in *The Social Dilemma* and consider actions promoted by social media users themselves.

The two types of solutions presented in the film concern structural, collective action, such as political-level regulation (only mentioned very briefly), and individual action, such as turning off notifications. To investigate how these were received on Twitter, we sampled words used by the actors in the film when discussing each type of solution along with subsequent snowball sampling of related words used concurrently with these in social media posts. Considering only the frequency of these words, we quickly observe that posts concerning individual action are more common than structural, collective actions. Words associated with individual action – the most frequent of which are “delete” (grammatical variations of “delete” and the Danish equivalent “slet” are used 868 times combined), “notification” (261 times), “get off” social media (60 times), and “deactivate” (55 times) – are much more common than words associated with collective action, such as “reform” (78 times), “regulation” (49 times), “tax” (30 times), and “congress” (20 times). This is in line with the concept of responsibilisation, a term used by Syvertsen, Karlsen, and Bolling (2019) to denote the general societal focus on self-regulation of digital use as opposed to placing responsibility with tech companies or political actors (see also Syvertsen & Enli, 2019). The relative proportion of responses concerning individual action versus collective action suggests that Twitter users subscribe to the idea of the individual as mainly responsible for their own digital practices. However, as also noted by Mansell (2020), there is a contradiction between portraying the individual as powerless in the face of social media manipulation, as is done in the fictional storyline of *The Social Dilemma*, and nevertheless placing responsibility for management of social media use in the hands of the same individual.

We now take a closer look at the reactions on social media that refer to different forms of individual action. On Twitter, many present individual

attempts or wishes to combat the problems of social media discussed in the documentary, including quitting accounts, deleting apps, and turning off notifications. The words “delete”, and “notifications” appear in tweets where users express strong reactions of alarm, and where they indicate that they either have deleted or want to delete apps, turn off notifications, and limit their own (and their children’s) screen time. As mentioned previously, Facebook is especially targeted as a platform that social media users (on Twitter) have deleted. Reactions such as “Watched *The Social Dilemma* and turned off all my notifications” and “I’m literally going to delete everything”, or milder versions thereof – such as, “I haven’t deactivated my account, but I deleted the app off my phone” – are common. Those claiming to have acted in this direction call the experience “liberating”, “refreshing”, “peaceful”, and often encourage others to do the same.

Considering mentions of collective action, we find that Danish tweets are characterised by a larger proportion of suggestions aimed at political restrictions of advertisements and tech companies compared with American tweets, followed by the Twitter hashtag #dkpol (used to flag Danish political topics). One post that sparked debate in the comments section promotes the opinion that the public should have real insight into all algorithms used by Big Tech companies in order to make informed decisions. The following commentary includes both marketing people putting forward the idea that knowledge of social media users benefits small business owners, and others suggesting, for example, the prohibition of advertisements targeted at children under the age of 16.

Going through reactions on Twitter, humour plays a big part in the response of Twitter users toward the film. The majority of humorous comments centre on the irony of going on social media to warn about social media (but do so anyway). An example is: “*The Social Dilemma* on Netflix. Watch it. It is scary. (He said in a post on Twitter)”. Humorous comments especially centre on lack of willpower, such as the many posts in the form of “me, also me” memes, where the first “me” watches *The Social Dilemma* and swears off all social media, and the second “also me” immediately checks the Twitter news feed. This type of humour can be considered a reaction to the feeling of being “trapped” (as one Twitter user comments), which the film seems to have induced in many. Moreover, humorous posts like these speak to the contradictory messaging that *The Social Dilemma* has been critiqued for: While individual persons may try to delete Twitter, they soon find themselves right back on the platform, tweeting about exactly that.

Responses in Danish news media articles

The article dataset from Danish news media consists of both reviews and opinion pieces, as well as other mentions of the film in news articles, for instance, news reports on how Facebook responded to its messages (Jørgensen, 2020; Stisen, 2020).

The six reviews of *The Social Dilemma* in news media are overall positive, giving the film three–five stars out of six (Bjernemose, 2020; Christensen, C.D., 2020; Ernst, 2020; Høeg, 2020; Lund, 2020; Ravn, 2020). The dramatised elements of the film receive some negative comments in reviews, especially that they make the film “too easy” (Ravn, 2020), but the reviewers in most cases think that dramatisation is a necessary (if, perhaps, overly pedagogical) tool for getting the “important” message across (Bjernemose, 2020; Lund, 2020).

The seven opinion pieces in various ways frame *The Social Dilemma* as an important contribution to the public debate around technology use (Calvin, 2020; Mathiesen, 2020; Olsen, 2020; Overgaard, 2020; Pind, 2020; Poulsgaard, 2020).

All types of news media articles seem to accept the overall message of *The Social Dilemma*: that social media has become a severe threat to society affecting democracy, mental health, and individual behaviour in negative ways. The articles reinforce the dystopian view of the present and future with sentences such as “the end of the world suddenly seems like a terrifyingly probable outcome” (Bjernemose, 2020), “We are already in a dystopia” (Høeg, 2020), and “we have only seen the beginning of the violent changes to our society these new technologies can – and will – bring with them” (Poulsgaard, 2020). The main message of the film is also accepted in articles merely referring to the film, where *The Social Dilemma* is used as a reference point to various concurrent political situations, such as political polarisation (Bech-Nielsen, 2020; Vuorela, 2020), Covid-19 misinformation (Türker, 2020), and potential political regulations toward Big Tech monopolisation (Degn, 2020; Haslund, 2020). In these cases, *The Social Dilemma* is highlighted as explaining these trends.

The articles in the news media dataset are also a continuation of the responsabilisation discourse recognised by Syvertsen and colleagues (Syvertsen et al., 2019; Syvertsen & Enli, 2019). This is particularly apparent in the closing argument of an opinion piece from the newspaper *Berlingske*:

If a break on the acceleration-society exists, it may be in your hands. It is you who can choose to leave the phone a little more often and recover some of the lost time. [...] But of course, you can also scroll absent-mindedly through life and become a yet more stressed, self-absorbed, and ignorant version of the human you could have been. The choice is yours. (Overgaard, 2020: n.p.)

In another article – a review – the user is first described as “manipulated” and “defenceless” in the face of tech companies’ overwhelming knowledge of addiction behaviour, while, simultaneously, the only hope is to be found in this same user setting boundaries (C. D. Christensen, 2020). In these examples, the discrepancy between the individual as simultaneously helpless and primary agent of change also becomes apparent in the media articles.

The film’s proposed solutions for collective action are appraised in a few of the news media articles. In one, the author considers the suggestions to be promising but only vaguely elaborated on (Lund, 2020), while another author expresses hope that either politicians or the tech companies themselves will “free us from the digital prison” (Olsen, 2020). The most prominent example of a suggestion for collective action is found in the opinion piece by Danish centre-right politician Søren Pind, who expresses worry over the situation and calls for “the common effort of the community, from an evidence-based foundation, to find out how we together can clarify these things and fight a mercantile interest that, at its base, is not in the interest of democracy” (Pind, 2020: n.p.). His call to action is, however, as unspecified as those heard in the film itself. Finally, there are comments in the news media articles that awareness of issues around social media is in itself a solution, indicating a belief, for instance, that being aware of manipulation can help the individual to avoid it (J. K. Christensen, 2020).

The responses to the film in the news media articles – both reviews and opinion pieces – do not voice any substantial critiques of the film itself. While we do observe some criticism in the Twitter dataset, there is a noticeable lack of critical stance towards the framing of the film and the people appearing in the film in the news media articles. The contrasts between the two datasets may be related to the genre difference of social media vis-à-vis news media articles as well as differences in the intended audience. Nevertheless, the lack of critique and debate in opinion-making news articles mentioning the film is striking.

Concluding discussion

In this chapter, we have discussed how *The Social Dilemma* film has been received – positively and negatively – by academic scholars, in news media reviews and opinion pieces, and on Twitter. We have done so through surveying and analysing the material we have collected in the form of scholarly and media reviews, and data from Twitter as indicative of public responses to the film, backed up by a preliminary focus group of Danish high-school students, from which we gained an initial understanding of the issues and critiques that could be examined in the film.

While critics of the film have acknowledged that it adds important insights to the public conversation around the power of social media platforms (e.g., Mansell, 2020), academic critics seem to suggest that it fails on several fronts in communicating its messages: first, in terms of sending contradictory messages

(e.g., whether anyone knows who is in control of social media platforms); second, by overlooking central issues (such as conditions of workers in the tech industry); third, by not suggesting serious and systemic solutions to the issues it raises; and finally, that the agency of users is belittled in favour of the ethical design thinking of former executives turned tech-dissidents, who were part of designing these systems in the first place.

The public responses collected from Twitter were predominantly very positive towards the film. While the aesthetics of the film were found to be scary to some, it was also seen as positive in terms of being a welcome alarm and awareness-raiser against the evils of surveillance capitalism and the power of social media platforms. A limited number of the public responses were also critical of the film's tendency to place responsibility onto the individual users of platforms, rather than addressing structural issues. In conjunction with this point, some online comments also questioned whether the so-called "tech bros" were the people best suited to propose any solutions to the problem, as they (in the case of Justin Rosenstein) were still making use of online ads and benefitting from the wealth gained in their current and former tech jobs. This point to some extent mirrors the academic critiques. Finally, some online commentators used irony to respond to the film, as an affective way to deal with what can only be taken to be a form of apathy: that the messages of the film are real and serious, but that in commenting on the film, they are further being active on Twitter, and therefore still engulfed in the world of social media.

The news media reviews and opinion pieces were almost entirely positive towards the film, accepting its messages concerning the problems of social media and Big Tech companies. The lack of critical reflections about the framing of the film and its stylistic choices stands in contrast – at least to a certain extent – to the more varied types of responses found on Twitter, and what we gleaned from the preliminary focus group with the high-school students.

In conclusion, we might say that as a case of tech criticism, *The Social Dilemma* serves as an example of critique turned into a socio-public dramatisation, placing former tech culprits in the role of saviour against the rampant surveillance capitalism that Silicon Valley continues to spew. The film's messages were indeed seen as being on point and accepted across Twitter and news media outlets. A few responses from scholars, and some responses on Twitter, do indicate that the film is considered a problematic instance of the techlash, since its main protagonists were culprits in creating the many problems facing us in this current moment in time. And, it might be added in a more paraphrased manner, that some members of the public consider the self-proclaimed (big) tech-dissidents as also leveraging a dystopian portrayal of all things related to online platforms to promote their own messages (see also Karppi & Nieborg, 2021). Yet, these critiques were few and sparse compared to how audiences in general welcomed the film's messages. Taking

the fear and the backlash toward social media platforms that currently exist in society into account, the exaggerated drama was accepted and even embraced by the general public as a welcome warning. As an example of how social media platforms and surveillance capitalism exist as a general societal matter of concern (Latour, 2004), *The Social Dilemma* shows how public stances towards these issues are responsive to alarms about the dangers of online platforms, yet with a detectable public scepticism about who delivers these messages and how they do so.

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Endnotes

1. Since the posts we analyse were made on the platform X while it was called Twitter (the shift happened July 2023), we refer to the platform as Twitter in this chapter.
2. All citations from Twitter are condensed or paraphrased versions of the original posts to protect the identity of the Twitter account owners.